

# International Yeats Studies

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Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 1

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December 2016

## International Yeats Studies, Issue 1

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### Recommended Citation

(2016) "International Yeats Studies, Issue 1," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol1/iss1/1>

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## Editor's Note

*I*nternational Yeats Studies was conceived by the organizing board of the International Yeats Society as a means of bringing together national and other Yeats societies around the world. This journal is designed to complement the *Yeats Annual*, published under the general editorship of Warwick Gould. *International Yeats Studies* will be published twice a year and aims to include a variety of approaches to the study of Yeats. The editorial board draws together scholars from across the globe, and we hope that when it is possible, the journal will publish important essays translated into English from other languages. In addition to critical essays and reviews, we hope that the journal will serve as a platform for reports from the field, such as productions, readings, and other events that will be of interest to Yeats scholars everywhere.

We are grateful to many organizations and individuals for their enthusiasm and diligence in bringing *International Yeats Studies* into being. We would especially like to thank Geraldine Higgins, Director of the Irish Studies Program at Emory University; Marjorie Howes, Associate Professor of English at Boston College; Gregory Kalsacheur, S.J., Dean of the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences at Boston College; Oliver P. Rafferty, S.J., Professor of History and Director of Irish Programs at Boston College; and Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, Assistant Professor of English at Emory University, for facilitating generous donations from their institutions. We are also grateful to John Morgenstern, Executive Editor at Clemson University Press, and Anthony Cond, Managing Director at Liverpool University Press, for their support. Wayne Chapman, Yeats scholar and former Executive Editor at Clemson University Press, believed in this project from its inception; we thank him for his vision and for his generosity with his time.

It is fitting that our first issue, on the theme of "A Writer Young and Old," contains a previously unpublished essay by Lady Gregory as well as a study of the Yeatsian echoes in new work from Paul Muldoon and Bernard O'Donoghue. The editorial board is grateful to the Gregory estate, the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library, the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, and the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University, for permission to print previously unpublished Lady Gregory material.

As we anticipate our next issue, I would also like to express thanks to the editorial board for their thoughtful and tireless work: Charles Armstrong, Matthew Campbell, Wayne Chapman, Alex Davis, David Dwan, Margaret Mills Harper, Laura Izarra, Youngmin Kim, Ben Levitas, Michael McAteer, Lucy McDiarmid, Rónán McDonald, Neil Mann, Emilie Morin, Alexandra Poulain, John Paul Riquelme, Yoko Sato, Ronald Schuchard, Hedwig Schwall, Vincent Sherry, Tara Stubbs, Joseph Valente, and Tom Walker.

L. A.

## WORDS FOR MUSIC? PERHAPS.

Margaret Mills Harper

**T**he title of the sequence *Words for Music Perhaps*, published by Cuala Press in 1932 and then included in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), is a red herring: the twenty-five short poems of the sequence are not really meant to be set to music. Yeats told his old friend Olivia Shakespeare as much when he wrote her in March 1929 that “I am writing *Twelve poems for music*—have done three of them (and two other poems)—no[t] so much that they may be sung as that I may define their kind of emotion to myself. I want them to be all emotion & all impersonal” (L 758). Indeed, both W. B. and George Yeats seem to have found the question of actual musical settings the cause for amusement. R. F. Foster quotes George Yeats writing to Tom McGreevy that “William...yesterday came dashing along from his cot to announce that he was going to write twelve songs and I had got to purchase ‘a musical instrument’ at once and set them to music...All said songs being of a most frivolous nature!” (Life 2 385).<sup>1</sup> Given that George did not play a musical instrument, not to mention that it seems not to have mattered *which* musical instrument she was meant to buy, frivolous might be the least that could be said about the idea.

However, the poems in this major late sequence are certainly musical in the sense that Yeats seems to have meant in his letter to Shakespeare: short, intense lyrics, often in modified ballad metre or even more compact rhythm, with seemingly simple diction, often including song-like refrains. The *Words* also seem more “frivolous” than weighty poems in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* like “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” “Blood and the Moon,” “Coole Park, 1929,” and “Coole and Ballylee, 1931,” or even from other major sequences of this period, such as “A Man Young and Old,” “A Woman Young and Old,” or “Supernatural Songs” (which of course shares the suggestion of musicality in its title—and is also distinctly unlikely to inspire actual musical settings).

Yet the phrase “Words for Music” can suggest a way of reading these poems productively, particularly the seven that feature the speaker Crazy Jane. Some of the philosophical elements of the poems may come into focus if we suppose the ambiguous phrase “words for music” to mean not only “words designed for setting to music” but also “words substituted for music” or even “words whose purpose is musical.” For the poems are anything but frivolous—or rather, their light touch is part of a spiritual and intellectual purpose which includes the question of words’ inherent musicality and what the nonverbal qualities of words contribute to their ability (or not) to express certain states of

the human soul. These short lyrics call into question verities about art, such as the importance of beauty and the link between beauty and nobility, of which Yeats was often (but not always) a fierce proponent. The poems also highlight ideas that are prominent in Yeats's work after 1917 such as an emphasis on the simplicity of joy and wisdom. Tom O'Roughley, a poetic speaker from a decade earlier than Crazy Jane and who in some ways prepares the way for her, notably says that "An aimless joy is a pure joy" and "wisdom is a butterfly / And not a gloomy bird of prey" (VP 337–338). Other philosophical conceptions that are part of the soundscape of *Words for Music Perhaps* include the ideas, first, that souls create reality through many lives and by means of images, and, second, that eternal truths must be local and temporally specific even though reality is spaceless and timeless. As is often true in late Yeats, the particular self (or ego, or will, to use some of the terms of *A Vision*) is always in dialogue with the soul (that aspect of the human being which is timeless and spaceless). The opposition between the two is also a cooperation or refraction: the one requires the other. This notion implies a continual interaction between multiplicity and singularity in individual people as well as all they create (which is all of reality).

As I write the words above, the poems themselves seem to mock me, especially those spoken by Crazy Jane. As Yeats wrote in the letter to Olivia Shakespear quoted above, the poems are "the opposite of my recent work and all praise of joyous life" (L 758). They resist the scholar almost successfully, as Wallace Stevens might say; their intellectual virtuosity occurs within a bold dismissal of abstract language as well as the magisterial and confessional personal voice that characterises much of Yeats's mature poetry. This resistance is part of their purpose: the *Words for Music Perhaps* put weighty concepts under a "frivolous" surface, demonstrating that wisdom is like the butterfly effect in chaos theory, causing a hurricane by fluttering its wings, or (to change metaphors) like a harmonic structure sounding silently behind a musical melody played on a single instrument.

The essay that follows will examine some of the texts surrounding the Crazy Jane poems from *Words for Music Perhaps*, using as the starting illustration for its concepts some of the contents of the Rapallo D Notebook. I hope to show that the sequence, especially the Crazy Jane poems, gave Yeats the creative vehicle he needed to set space and time against ideas of the universal and eternal, to explore issues of possession and dispossession, and to find oppositions and interactions on the level of voice and subjectivity that were necessary for his theme. Crazy Jane became the main instrument upon which he played the tunes of *Words for Music Perhaps*. Her instrumentality moved him towards his late paradigm of creativity, which posits imaginative surrender as the source of power.

## I. RAPALLO D NOTEBOOK, SEVEN PROPOSITIONS, AND A VISION

The manuscript holdings of the National Library of Ireland include five of what are known as Rapallo Notebooks. The fourth of these “sacred objects in the great Yeatsian mine of manuscripts” (Foster 385), usually referred to as Rapallo D (NLI 13,581), documents Yeats’s ongoing research and creative work undertaken after he and George Yeats moved to their sunny flat in Rapallo, Italy, in the autumn of 1928. Rapallo D contains a curious assortment of topics. Research aimed at revising *A Vision*, about such topics as the Great Year in Indian philosophy and “Astrology & the nature of reality,” join fragments of several poems, including “Coole Park, 1929,” several of the poems collected into the sequence *Words for Music Perhaps*, and “Byzantium.” On some pages are lists, of books to read or events on the social calendar, and on some are intriguing ideas that never became finished works.

The importance of *A Vision* to the *Words for Music Perhaps* sequence is amply demonstrated by the notebook, if that were needed, though Yeats also made it plain in September 1929 to Olivia Shakespeare:

But this new edition [of *A Vision*] will be a new book, all I hope clear and as simple as the subject permits. Four or five years’ reading has given me some knowledge of metaphysics and time to clear up endless errors in my understanding of the script. My conviction of the truth of it all has grown also and that makes one clear. I am taking to Rapallo what will be I hope a clear typed script of the whole book. I will work at it here and there free at last, now that all is constructive to sharpen definitions and enrich descriptions.<sup>2</sup> I should go to press with it next spring. I shall begin also I hope the new version of the Robartes stories. Having proved, by undescribed process, the immortality of the soul to a little group of typical followers, he will discuss the deductions with an energy and a dogmatism and a cruelty I am not capable of in my own person. I have a very amusing setting thought out. I shall also finish the book of thirty poems for music I am more than half through. “For Music” is only a name, nobody will sing them. (*L* 768–69)

Revising *A Vision*, which was published after much effort in January 1926 but unsatisfying to its author even before it was finished, took many years of reading as well as redrafting and writing new large parts of the book. The many other projects undertaken during the long process of reworking *A Vision* do not all depend upon its occult system, or do not depend upon it in the same ways (given that Yeats regarded the system as a structure that underlay all the aspects of his, and all, life). The poems in *Words for Music Perhaps* do not derive from the system explicitly, but some of the issues underlying the lyrics of the sequence show themselves if some of the concepts from *A Vision* are kept

in sight. Nor was *A Vision* the only thing on Yeats's mind. *Words For Music Perhaps* is the sequence in which are found most of the poems containing the persona or mask that Yeats called Crazy Jane, and it is this figure around whom cluster some of the pressures on Yeats at the time: anxieties over ageing, ill health, and mortality; anger at censorship and sexual repression in the new Irish Free State; and frustration with toxic politics in the Irish Seanad and the Abbey Theatre.<sup>3</sup>

About halfway through the Rapallo D notebook are two drafts of "Seven Propositions," a brief and deceptively compact numbered outline of statements that comprise several assumptions upon which the system of *A Vision* rests presented.<sup>4</sup> Yeats sent a copy of them to Frank Pearce Sturm in October 1929, explaining that the numbered list of Propositions was "probably stiff" because "They are mainly aimed at AE who in reading my Packet preferred to it certain Indian aphorisms, & seems to think that aphorism [is] the true method." The Propositions are presented not as the Yeatses' system but as a justification for the validity of astrology, as Yeats told Sturm: "They contain the first theoretical justification of Astrology made in modern times, & even that which antiquity must have had has not come down to us."<sup>5</sup> Thus, Yeats wanted to see what Sturm (and also AE) thought about them. In the Rapallo notebook, the Propositions (six in the first draft, seven in the second) are headed "Astrology & the nature of reality."

As Neil Mann notes, the Propositions are intimately related to *A Vision* although they present reality from the perspective of spirits rather than of the perceptible world.<sup>6</sup> The first proposition, in the version Yeats sent to Sturm, describes existence as a "timeless & spaceless community of spirits," each unique, who perceive and are perceived by each other. The second proposition brings this immaterial multiplicity of spirits into the world humans can know; the spirits are reflected into time and space as "destinies," which see each other in the material world as "thoughts, images, objects of sense." Propositions three and four note the mechanisms through which destinies take shape. They form completely only at "certain moments of birth, or passivity," and they translate a spirit's emotion and intellect as temporal and spatial location, respectively (validating horoscopes, which require such coordinates). The slightly more expansive versions of the propositions in the Rapallo notebook describe these certain receptive moments in human life, when the self "is reduced almost to nothing," as moments in which a fundamental yoking of fate and freedom take place. In propositions five and six, human life is described as consisting either of struggling against or working with fate—that fate or destiny, from the point of view of spirit, being the transcending of time and space back into limitless existence. Thus "Every possible statement, in principle contains both terms—self and that which is perceived—but the perception of fate precedes the

experience of freedom.” The horoscope or destiny comes first, but “The body & mind of the new born child is the reply freedom makes to the horoscope.”

The concepts in *A Vision* that most clearly relate to the Seven Propositions occur in the material Yeats found perhaps least acceptable about his first edition, and which he was hoping to correct as he revised. He admits as much in the opening to Book II of the new book: “I knew nothing of the *Four Principles* when I wrote the last Book [that is, Book I of *AVB*, retained from *AVA*]: a script had been lost through frustration, or through my own carelessness” (*CW14* 137). The *Four Principles* are discarnate versions of the *Four Faculties*, their “innate ground,” as Yeats describes them in *AVB*. They might be thought of as occurring in the realm of the timeless and spaceless spirits, reflecting in the world of time and space as the Faculties, the fundamental idea being again that reality exists as an interaction between the perceptible world and something that cannot be perceived or imagined (though *A Vision* attempts to describe it). The term most often used in *AVB* for this reality, which must be conceived of as simultaneously fully populated by multiplicities of spirits and a single unity, is the *Thirteenth Cone*.<sup>7</sup> Book III of *AVB* ends with an image-rich depiction:

The Thirteenth Cone is a sphere because sufficient to itself; but as seen by Man it is a cone. It becomes even conscious of itself as so seen, like some great dancer, the perfect flower of modern culture, dancing some primitive dance and conscious of his or her own life and of the dance. There is a mediaeval story of a man persecuted by his Guardian Angel because it was jealous of his sweetheart, and such stories seem closer to reality than our abstract theology. All imaginable relations may arise between a man and his God. I only speak of the Thirteenth Cone as a sphere and yet I might say that the gyre or cone of the Principles is in reality a sphere, though to Man, bound to birth and death, it can never seem so, and that it is the antinomies that force us to find it a cone. Only one symbol exists, though the reflecting mirrors make many appear and all different. (*CW14* 175)

Note that this passage is suffused with sexuality: dance, flower, and curious tale of the jealous Guardian Angel all lead to the observation that “All imaginable relations may arise between a man and his God.”

## II. “CRAZY JANE REPROVED”

That “All imaginable relations” describe the interactions between humanity and divinity, with the emphatic inclusion of sexual relations, links the system of *A Vision* with Crazy Jane and *Words for Music Perhaps* (among other characters from the 1920s and 1930s, from Ribh in *Supernatural Songs* to Attracta in *The Herne’s Egg* to Mary Bell in the *Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends*,



mentioned in the letter to Shakespear above). Yeats quite often in his late works expresses intense (and often sexual) ways in which inconceivable, dimensionless entities (which are both singular and plural) are reflected into time and space as “destinies” and see each other in the material world as “thoughts, images, objects of sense.” Like the stories mentioned in the passage from *A Vision*, the poems in *Words for Music Perhaps* aim to be “closer to reality than our abstract theology.”

To illustrate this principle with reference to poems rather than my own abstractions, I turn first to “Crazy Jane Reproved,” the second of the twenty-five lyrics of *Words for Music Perhaps*. The nod to music occurs in the last of both seven-line tetrameter stanzas: “*Fol de rol, fol de rol.*” Yeats told Margot Ruddock that the nonsense syllables had “no special value...any meaningless words would do....I put ‘fol de rol’ at the end of the stanzas in this poem to make it less didactic, gayer, more clearly a song.”<sup>8</sup> Yeats may also be playing with the form of the “little song” of a Shakespearean sonnet: the seven-line stanzas are half the length of the fourteen of a sonnet, and each stanza, rhyming abab before a rhyming couplet, gestures toward sonnet form. We may be hearing an echo of sonnet-like eroticism, in the sestets as well as the *fol de rols*, which nod toward such Shakespearean bawdiness as in the song “It was a lover and his lass” (*As You Like It* V.3).<sup>9</sup> The little songs treat profound matters, though: each stanza contains a quatrain setting forth the argument that “Heaven” works harder to create a minute and intricate thing like a shell than a huge event of the kind usually associated with godlike power. “I care not what the sailors say,” Jane begins: “All those dreadful thunder-stones, / All that storm that blots the day / Can but show that Heaven yawns” (VP 509). The blunt opening quatrain, putting Jane’s “I” the first word in her blunt refutation of common wisdom, uses the short lines and words typical of her lyrics (with words like “thunder-stones” and “blots” nonetheless packing intense images). Heaven “yawns,” a word that in Yeats is often associated with sexual arousal (along with “stretch,” as has been analysed definitely by David R. Clark), and the linked suggestions of divinity, sexuality, and raw power may explain the abrupt transition into the couplet that follows, which reproves Europa for her choice of bestial partner: “Great Europa played the fool / That changed a lover for a bull.” An equal jolt follows into the nonsense syllables “*Fol de rol, fol de rol.*”<sup>10</sup>

The second stanza repeats the intellectual movement of the first: cosmic argument for four lines and then personal comment about a woman’s erotic choice. The tone of the first quatrain is sweeter, however; trochaic metre is replaced in the first two lines by less aggressive iambs, as is appropriate for the matter described: “To round that shell’s elaborate whorl, / Adorning every secret track / With the delicate mother-of-pearl, / Made the joints of Heaven crack.” The last couplet (before the final line of *fol de rols*) marks the only moment in



the poem that might justify the title, as Jane may be reproving herself for having chosen Jack the Journeyman as a lover, the “roaring, ranting” Jack of course in the position of Zeus as bull in the first stanza.

The voice of Crazy Jane has been introduced to the reader of the sequence in the first poem, “Crazy Jane and the Bishop,” which gives some introduction of her specific situation: we learn that she is Irish and rural, old, openly sexual, and outrageously anticlerical (promising to “spit” on the Bishop in the strong rhyming word in her final line before the refrain). In “Crazy Jane Reproved,” Jane’s voice sounds in a doubled tone, which is present also in the previous lyric though it is perhaps less pronounced there. The unreproved Jane of the second lyric sounds both like a licentious old peasant woman and, especially in the second stanza, like a certain young male Irish poet: the description of the shell may well remind readers of the “twisted, echo-harboursing shell” of “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” the first poem Yeats kept for his collected poems throughout his career, or the “wilderling whirls” of the shell in “The Sad Shepherd,” the companion poem (*VP* 64–69). What is new in this poem from the early Yeats is the explicit reflection of divinity in sexuality, the tonal boldness (noting that Europa “played the fool,” for example, makes free with colloquial language), and the sudden transitions between ideas. These effects all force the reader to imagine what connections exist between the ideas and images. Something is moving behind the scenes, behind the structures of the poem, something that in terms of Jane’s specific situation may be connected with her having done what she advises against, setting her heart on her journeyman. The story of her life becomes part of a world of storms at sea, myth, and the intricacies of a heaven found in a shell if not a Blakean grain of sand.

### III. “CRAZY JANE ON THE DAY OF JUDGMENT”

The poem that follows “Crazy Jane Reproved” in the sequence is “Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment,” drafts of which occur in the Rapallo D Notebook along with an alternate title: “Crazy Jane at the End of the World.” The first inkling of the poem seems to have occurred in October 1929, in the middle of other work, notably the poem “After Long Silence,” with its theme of bifurcated wisdom and passion: “Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young / We loved one another and were ignorant” (*VP* 523). Like “After Long Silence,” this Crazy Jane poem features two lovers, though these have not chosen either love or wisdom in what presumably is a long-standing affair. Instead, Jane’s voice, the dominant of the two, insists upon love taking “the whole / body and soul” (*VP* 510). Her lover, who seems a slightly amused echo rather than an active speaker, chimes in that “That’s certainly the case” after every other stanza. Jane’s voice itself again occupies several tonal registers simultaneously.

The first and last of the four very short stanzas (merely two-beat except for the final lines) are abstract and philosophical, on the topics of love in its relation to unity and timelessness. The second features the verbally provocative voice that is recognisably Jane's. She speaks words that are short, harsh, and invasive, like *spit* in "Crazy Jane and the Bishop." Here, the monosyllabic words *scoff*, *lour*, *scold*, and *hour*, whose alliterative hard *sk* consonant and assonant [au] diphthong contain sonic echoes of Anglo-Saxon or, indeed, Old Norse, make short work of any notion of romance or beauty in association with love, even before her lover gets in his comment.

The idea that seems to have prompted this poem occurs in the line that Yeats toyed with using as a refrain in the first draft, which is labelled "Subject for a Crazy Jane Poem" in Rapallo D: "Love is for wholes whether of body or souls." Yeats wrote variants of this line repeatedly until he arrived at the phrase as he wanted it: "Love is for whole," "Love is not love unless it take the whole," "Love is not satisfied with less than all," "Passion asks for all," "Love needs all," "Love asks all," and finally "Love is all / Unsatisfied / That cannot take the whole / Body & soul" (NLI 13,581 *passim*).<sup>11</sup> For the final shape of the poem, Yeats opens the poem with the main concept, in the irreducible shorthand of the word "whole" in conjunction with the phrase "body and soul," using for refrain not the abstract statement but the prosaic, nearly comic alternating lines: "*And that is what Jane said*" and "*'That's certainly the case,' said he.*" "Crazy Jane on God" makes a different choice, using as repeating line *All things remain in God* and as material for its four stanzas sharp images that compare a nightly lover to ghostly armies, a mysteriously lit ruined house, and the woman's body as a road that "makes no moan" as "men pass over" it. It too, however, draws a sharp distinction between the matter of the rest of the poem and the line that nods to the "music perhaps": the repeating refrain.

The strategy is similar in the two poems, and it is one that Yeats uses throughout *Words for Music Perhaps*. The effect might be best described using musical terms such as counterpoint or dissonance, a formal effect applying tension between two separate strands of sound or tone or discursive register as a determinant of meaning. The purpose is to indicate formally that the "body and soul" of Crazy Jane's philosophy must also mean the "body" of the poem interwoven with its "soul." Yeats would not have hesitated to connect poetic practice with philosophical and religious concerns, and this "music perhaps" is that which sounds in these lyrics. To use the language of the Seven Propositions, this kind of opposition is the visible trace of spirits at work, creating what might be described as the "destinies" or purposes of the poems, which occur there as "thoughts, images, objects of sense." The language of the last Proposition, about "self and that which is perceived," might also be used to describe this concept. If a poem were to illustrate the

last Proposition, that “Every possible statement, in principle contains both terms—self and that which is perceived—but the perception of fate precedes the experience of freedom.”

The continual interplay between text and meaning, and between form and formlessness, are poetic problems. Yeats displays them in stark terms in this series, using as mouthpiece an outrageous spokeswoman who is insistent that only by means of binaries—of body and soul, passivity and activity, sexuality and spirituality, transgression and truth, among others—is truth to be expressed. Yeats also engages in a unique way with the questions of possession and dispossession that haunt (a word I choose purposefully) his work generally. Jane is in some ways possessed by Yeats, her creator, as a medium is possessed by a spirit. Similarly, though, Yeats is also possessed by Jane, in the sense that he requires her voice in order to speak these poems. Formally, the problem Yeats seems to have been working with concerns the interplay between control and release, and complexity and simplicity: the strong poet was exploring new possibilities of the seeming quick sketch rather than the fully painted picture, a minimalism that is unusual in his body of work.

#### IV. DESTINIES AND *PRINCIPLES*

This is grand language for slender and compact poems, and I do not claim that this issue of formal poetics and philosophy is the only purpose served by *Words for Music Perhaps* (the lyrics also performed an important personal function, but that is a topic for another essay). However, it is still too frequently suggested that Yeats is, for example, a poet whose late work is marked by poems with great gravitas about cultural aristocracy and that the occult-inflected work is by and large not his best. Yet major work from the late period resists grandness, uses great tonal variation (including humour), and expresses occult truths—though sometimes, as in *Words for Music Perhaps*, not on the surface of the verse (or dramatic plot, in the case of the plays). In these poems Yeats composes short, harsh-sounding lyrics just after writing a beautiful and high meditation like “Coole Park, 1929,” and he works on *Words for Music Perhaps* in conjunction with a play like *The Cat and the Moon*. This sequence flamboyantly aims at profundities expressed through a seemingly worthless instrument, an old woman who refuses to keep to social norms and is thus regarded as “crazy.”

One problem remains with “Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment,” which is that its title, like that of “Crazy Jane Reproved,” is not immediately obvious. Jane makes a claim for eternal truths, about love requiring “the whole, / Body and soul,” and the final stanza mentions the end of time, which in Christian theology occurs on the Day of Judgment:

‘What can be shown?  
 What true love be?  
 All could be known or shown  
 If Time were but gone.’  
 ‘That’s certainly the case,’ said he.

The early title “Crazy Jane at the End of the World” suggests that “On the Day of Judgment” implies that the poem takes place “on” that day, in other words, that Jane (along with her lover, who might be taken to be Jack the Journeyman) are conversing “bone to bone,” to use the resonant phrase from “Sixteen Dead Men” (VP 395) that is also suggestive of the poem “Three Things,” one of the first of *Words for Music Perhaps* to be written. Jack is gone or dead in all the lyrics of the sequence, so the two would presumably be talking together only in an after-death state. (This is admittedly an overly literal requirement for the little lyric—and Jane herself is not dead in the other poems, unless we read “Three Things” to be spoken by her.) If “on” in the title means “on the topic of,” its applicability is clearer. Of course, both meanings may be present, which I suspect is the case. Jane is a philosopher whose theology of bodily wisdom will justify many, herself included, at the last day, *and* Jane’s wisdom, necessarily in the temporal and spatial world (the line “If Time were but gone” indicates of course that it is not), nonetheless participates in a condition that can be described in the terminology of *A Vision* as emanating from the realm of the *Principles*.

In a difficult passage added to the 1937 *A Vision* (and revised even when the book was in proof), Yeats describes a situation on the Great Wheel in which occurs a second “opening of the *tinctures*.” *Tincture* is the term for the counter-principles of Primary and Antithetical that underpin the system. The first opening of the *tinctures* occurs at the top of the wheel, in the Phases that cluster around the full moon. Yeats describes the phenomenon thus:

The opening means the reflection inward of the *Four Faculties*: all are as it were mirrored in personality, Unity of Being becomes possible. Hitherto we have been part of something else, but now discover everything within our own nature. Sexual love becomes the most important event in life, for the opposite sex is nature chosen and fated. Personality seeks personality. Every emotion begins to be related to every other as musical notes are related. It is as though we touched a musical string that set other strings vibrating. (CW14 65)

Yeats had described this main opening of the *tinctures* in the 1925 *A Vision*, but he seems not to have understood until the revision of the book that there is a second, and what it means. (In general, Yeats learned much more about the *Principles* between the first and second versions of the treatise.) The second opening, which occurs near the dark of the moon, uses words that I suggest

are appropriate to the spare poems of *Words for Music Perhaps*, which aim for a kind of transparency by means of sound and pattern as part of spiritual profundity: “During this spiritual objectivity, or spiritual *primary*, the *Faculties* ‘wear thin,’ the *Principles*, which are, when evoked from the point of view of the *Faculties*, a sphere, shine through.”<sup>12</sup>

In “Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment,” stanzas two and three emphasise the first kind of opening, in which every emotion is related to each other and “Sexual love becomes the most important event in life, for the opposite sex is nature chosen and fated.” In stanza two of the poem, every emotion is part of love, including “the sour” of Jane’s strong personality. Stanza three, beginning “Naked I lay, / The grass my bed,” and repeating the word *naked* in the third line, describes a sexual encounter “That black day,” though it is silent about in what sense the fated day is black. Jane’s description of lovemaking is also much tamer in the final version than seems to have been the poet’s inclination in the drafts. The version of the equivalent stanza in the early “Subject for a ‘Crazy Jane’ Poem” puts the event in present tense and turns it into an admonition to Jack (which includes additional proof of Jane’s temperament):

See [~~the~~] in the night, when we meet in  
the dark wood, that you touch—all potions [~~portions~~] of  
My body—every plane & mound—omit  
But one I shall think of Jim or John  
Or some that might take your place (NLI 13,581)<sup>13</sup>

The sexual union that is “hidden away” resonates throughout Crazy Jane’s lyrics as if it were “a musical string that set other strings vibrating,” but a less direct sense of destiny, self and perception, and timeless/spaceless reality, to echo again the terminology from the Seven Propositions, haunts the framing first and fourth stanzas of this poem. Something “wears thin” and “shines through,” or, to change from a visual to an aural metaphor, the “music perhaps” of words becomes audible. The poem that follows “Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment” hints at this something as “the light lost / In my mother’s womb” (VP 511). Formally as well as conceptually, the moment when personality is nearly effaced—Yeats’s in the voice of Jane, Jane’s in the “light” or when she realises that “nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent” (VP 513)—is the moment of greatest clarity.

This is not to claim that “Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment” or the other poems of *Words for Music Perhaps* apply the geometric concepts of *A Vision* in any straightforward way. However, the Yeatses’ system was present in all that Yeats did during the 1920s, and his work on its ideas, whether described in *A Vision* or the Seven Propositions, is of a piece with his work on poems, plays,

and stories. For *Words for Music Perhaps*, the system is more than generally relevant: issues such as the relation between the universe of time and space to realms that shine through as well as transcend it, the reality of spirits, perception creating reality, the many and the one, and freedom and necessity, are all motifs in the sequence.

### Notes

1. Letter from 11 February 1929.
2. Wade's *Letters* gives the sentence as "constructive," but in *InteLex*, the sentence reads "now that all is constructed to sharpen definitions & enrich descriptions"; see letter to Olivia Shakespear, 13 September [1929], *CL InteLex* #5285.
3. The best study of Crazy Jane in these contexts remains that of Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
4. A corrected version of the Seven Propositions exists in a TS housed in NLI 30,280. See Mann's presentation and excellent summary of them: <http://www.yeatsvision.com/7Propositions.html>. The Propositions are reprinted, as Mann point out, in Virginia Moore, *The Unicorn: W. B. Yeats's Search for Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 378–89; Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* 2nd ed (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), 236–37; and Hazard Adams, *Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision* (New York: Russell & Russell, [1955] 1968), 287–88.
5. In Richard Taylor, ed., *Frank Pearce Sturm: His Life, Letters, and Collected Work* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 100; see also *CL InteLex* #5291.
6. Mann, <http://www.yeatsvision.com/7Propositions.html>.
7. Neil Mann elucidates the concept in "The Thirteenth Cone." *W. B. Yeats's A Vision: Explinations and Contexts*, ed. Neil Mann, Matthew Gibson, and Claire V. Nally (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Digital Press, 2012), 159–93.
8. W. B. Yeats and Margot Ruddock. *Ah, Sweet Dancer: W. B. Yeats and Margot Ruddock, A Correspondence*, ed. Roger McHugh (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 30–31.
9. I am indebted to Lauren Arrington for noticing the Shakespearean echo here.
10. See David R. Clark, "Stretching and Yawning with Yeats and Pound," *The Malahat Review* 29 (1974): 104–107; rpt. [http://baillement.com/dossier/clark\\_yeats\\_pound.html](http://baillement.com/dossier/clark_yeats_pound.html).
11. See also W. B. Yeats, *Words for Music Perhaps and Other Poems: Manuscript Materials*, ed. David R. Clark (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1999), 351–363.
12. Neil Mann was invaluable in helping me to understand this section of *A Vision* as Catherine Paul and I prepared our edition; any errors in my comprehension of course remain my own.
13. See also Clark, ed. *Words for Music Perhaps*, 351.

**“GRANT ME AN OLD MAN’S FRENZY”:  
AGE AND RAGE ON THE STAGE**

*Alexandra Poulain*

As Yeats made clear in his 1923 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, devoted (against all odds) to “The Irish Dramatic Movement,” he considered his involvement in the theater as a crucial part of his literary activity. He was also deeply aware of the various Western theatrical traditions out of which modern drama emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Yeats’s lifelong concern with old age constantly intersects with his fascination with the great Western theatrical figures of old men, from the comic *senex* of classical comedy to the great tragic heroes who endure the mortification of failing bodies and impending madness, in particular Oedipus and Lear. From very early on, his plays explore both the anxiety, even revulsion, which the ageing process causes in him, and an acute awareness of the social violence exerted against the aged. This tension, I want to argue, finds a privileged mode of expression in the theater, perhaps because there is something eminently histrionic in the “frenzy” with which his ageing heroes respond to this social violence, raging against the younger generations’ attempt to disempower and marginalise them.

In the first part of this essay, I look at a number of Yeats’s early plays, which, I argue, recycle the comic type of the angry old man, the *senex iratus* of classical comedy, and ambiguously revisit a theatrical tradition which tends to ridicule and chastise the old. In this tradition, the old man’s anger connotes the failure of self-control which characterises pathological senescence, an incapacity to regulate cravings which ought to have receded with age, a libidinal excess constructed both as grotesque and morally reprehensible. Yeats’s early plays, typically, both reactivate the cultural bias which the type vehicles and question its validity, often subverting the ageist ethos of classical comic tropes by infusing them with tragic overtones. Such plays ultimately expose the effort of younger generations to neutralise the old, relegating them to the status of spectators and, at best, advisors, and denying them any claims to sexual and emotional fulfilment. The second part discusses plays which reinvent the tragic version of the *senex*. Here Yeats does not allow old age to be passively disempowered, but has old men respond in rage to the indignities they are exposed to. Contrary to anger, which can be a rational, reflection-induced response to a perceived wrong, rage connotes a “visceral”<sup>1</sup> reaction, in word or in deed; it is uncontrolled, excessive and often destructive, an expression of intense frustration. In these plays, however, rage is not an object of ridicule, but rather the expression of restored dignity for old age. No matter how ineffective it may



be, it manifests a refusal to be silenced, to be the compliant target of symbolic or real violence. Finally, the third part addresses the two farcical Prologues delivered by strikingly similar, clownish Old Men in two plays written, respectively, at the beginning and end of Yeats's theatrical career: the Old Man of the original, comic version of *The King's Threshold* (1903), which was suppressed in the revised, tragic version of 1921, but returns, angrier than ever, as a farcical double of the ageing playwright, to deliver his theatrical testament in *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939). Remembering Oedipus and Lear, and rehabilitating the *senex iratus* of classical comedy, Yeats makes rage on the stage a modality of resistance to containment and silencing.

## I

Yeats's anxiety at the prospect of aging is manifest from the early plays, in which older characters are often based on the comic type of the *senex iratus* of classical Greek and Roman comedy and his later incarnations in the *comedia dell'arte* (Pantalone) and in Shakespeare (for instance, Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*). In this tradition, the *senex*, or "heavy father," is the repository of all forms of power—domestic, economic and political—and the guardian of patriarchy; he presides over the destinies of the younger generations and must be dislodged if they are to thrive sexually and socially. He is a miser and a bully, characterized, in Northrop Frye's words, by "his rages and threats, his obsessions and gullibility"<sup>2</sup>; he stands in the way of the young lovers, but his schemes are eventually thwarted and love triumphs. The type is usually treated negatively, as a source of fear and an object of ridicule, although Shakespeare's heavy fathers are rather more complex and ambivalently characterised. Chastising the *senex*, exposing his physical and moral failings and thwarting his schemes is a way of pushing against patriarchy and established rules, and making room for a measure of social change. Modern playwrights, however, are faced with a very different situation. Up to recent years and the development of a new interest in "age studies," it was widely assumed that with the rise of industrialisation, as old people retired from full-time employment and became dependent on state-afforded pensions, they were progressively relegated to the margins of society, a phenomenon which Gerald Gruman has described as a hallmark of the modernist lifestyle.<sup>3</sup> Although this narrative is being challenged by present-day cultural historians, it clearly chimes with Yeats's perception of the situation in modern Ireland, and his growing realisation that it "is no country for old men"—an anxiety which doubles his sense of marginalisation as a member of the social elite with whom he identifies.<sup>4</sup> In fact both concerns often merge, and it could be argued that in some cases old age is a metaphor for the old dispensation, the progressively

disempowered Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. In his early plays Yeats borrows freely from the classical comic tradition, but his handling of the type of the senex is eminently mutable and ambiguous. While some plays merely tend to replicate the cultural bias inherent in the type of the senex, others set out to challenge it, and expose the ideological violence that it perpetrates.

Yeats’s ambivalent response to ageing is vividly expressed in two closely related early plays, *The Land of Heart’s Desire* (1894) and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902, co-authored with Lady Gregory). In both plays, a young protagonist is torn between, on the one hand, earthly love, a simple life and the prospect of aging, and on the other hand the lure of imminent death and the promise of an idealised afterlife unburdened by the horror of physicality. Both plays dramatize a contest between the living and a supernatural entity who tries to win the protagonist over to the otherworld. In *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, on which I wish to focus here, Bridget is a female version of the ever-angry *senex*, embittered by a life of labour and constantly reminding Mary that “it is wrong / To mope and idle” (VPI 185). “Mother, you are too cross” (182), Shawn tells her at the play’s opening, a cue taken up again later by her husband Maurteen: “Do not be cross” (190); “you are much too cross” (191). The play, however, is not unsympathetic to Bridget, who has legitimate reasons to complain (Mary is engrossed in her book and fails to do her share of the housework) and is not incapable of charity, feeding the fairy child milk and honey; rather, with her constant bitterness and anger, she provides an image of Mary’s inevitable future, once the early joys of love have waned—unless Mary becomes instead so drained of youthful passion that she loses all fighting spirit, as Maurteen speculates:

But do not blame her greatly; (she will grow  
As quiet as a puff-ball in a tree  
When but the moons of marriage dawn and die  
For half a score of times.) (182)

Against the grotesque life-in-death of vegetative stupor which age promises, the play sets the lure of the otherworld,

Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,  
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,  
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue. (184, 206)

The lines, spoken first by Mary, then by the fairy Child, rupture the dominant pattern of iambic pentameters and figure the intrusion of the supernatural into the fabric of everyday language. The percussive rhythm and dense alliterative structure of the tetrameters, the anaphora and polysyndeton conspire to

construct an alternative, hypnotic voice, as if Mary were being ventriloquized by the Child even before she appears. Crucially, the lines make no positive claims about the otherworld, promising only an escape from the reality of aging which Bridget embodies, but this is sufficient reason for Mary to follow the Child and embrace death. The play's use of the *senex* type is thus eminently ambiguous: on the one hand, the cantankerous Bridget is a foil to the fairy child who offers an alluring alternative to a life of hard work and resentment; yet on the other hand, the play quietly makes the point that Bridget, for all her irascible senescence, embodies the life principle and resistance to the death wish. In the play's reinterpretation of the *senex iratus*, the old woman's anger is ultimately turned inward, as a form of negative energy which keeps her tethered to materialistic considerations and self-punishing practical chores, and incapable of the idealism of youth. Yet *The Land of Heart's Desire*, as indeed *Cathleen ni Houlihan* with the equally ambiguous Peter, implicitly questions the value of such idealism which seeks completion in death, not life, and ultimately destabilises conventional responses to the *senex* type, asking that we revise our assumptions about the pusillanimity of old age.

Another stock character from classical Greek and Roman comedy that resurfaces in the Yeatsian canon is the *senex amans*, the amorous old man. An ugly, jealous old man married to a very young woman, he is frequently cuckolded by a handsome younger man who seduces his wife behind his back. Paradoxically, this comic type occurs in a tragedy in the Yeatsian canon: in *Deirdre* (1907), Conchubar is framed after the classical *senex amans* and his avatar in the *comedia dell'arte*, Pantalone. The plot of the play also closely follows a comic plot: the old king Conchubar has chosen Deirdre for his wife, but she elopes instead with her young lover Naoise. When Conchubar, feigning reconciliation, seizes Naoise and tries to force Deirdre into marrying him, they gull him once again and are eventually reunited, but (this is the tragic twist) in death. The play makes it clear that the difference of age is a central issue, the cause of tragedy itself. The First Musician's expository tale recounts Conchubar's first chance encounter with Deirdre in her secluded house in the woods, "a child with an old witch to nurse her." "He went up thither daily," she continues, "till at last"

She put on womanhood, and he lost peace,  
And Deirdre's tale began. The King was old.  
A month or so before the marriage-day,  
A young man, in the laughing scorn of his youth,  
Naoise, the son of Usna, climbed up there,  
And having wooed, or, as some say, been wooed,  
Carried her off. (*VPI* 346)

Couched in the terse idiom of folktales, characterization is limited to indications of age: the “old” king is antagonized by “a young man, in the laughing scorn of his youth.” The polyptoton (young/youth) and epanalepsis (the repetition of a word at the beginning and end of a line) suffice to establish Naoise’s absolute superiority in the eyes of Deirdre, herself merely out of childhood as the euphemistic phrase “put on womanhood” indicates. The mention of Naoise’s “laughing scorn” also conjures up the ethos of classical comedy, in which the *senex amans*’ claim to remain sexually active is an object of ridicule. The First Musician completes Conchubar’s characterization in generic terms, reducing him to a stock character:

An old man’s love  
Who casts no second line is hard to cure;  
His jealousy is like his love. (*VPI* 348)

The aberrant love of the “old man” is pathologized (“hard to cure”) and distorted into the destructive, selfish emotion of “jealousy.” When Fergus attempts to convince the lovers that Conchubar has forgiven them, the Musician insists, twice, that “old men are jealous” (348, 349), and later tells Deirdre:

I have heard he loved you  
As some old miser loves the dragon-stone  
He hides among the cobwebs near the roof. (360)

The *topos* of the “old miser” rounds off Conchubar’s characterization as a grotesque, pathological *senex* whose claims to love and sexual fulfilment are illegitimate and morally offensive. In keeping with the comic tradition, he is chastised in the end for his incapacity to rein in his sexual urges when he destroys the very object of his desire, and finds himself once more frustrated. Thus the play uses comic conventions to a tragic end and censures the lecherous old man—although it also makes room for a different sort of reading, one more sympathetic to Conchubar. Certainly, Conchubar is cast as the patriarchal villain, who uses his status as High King to prey on Deirdre, spurning neither cunning, betrayal or sheer force to crush young love. Yet the play also repeatedly records the violence with which he is disqualified as a potential lover on account of his age. As we have seen, the First Musician keeps warning Deirdre against the love of old men, using the authority of the gnomic present (“old men are jealous”). When Deirdre tells her own story, the extreme simplicity of the diction reduces the complexity of emotional transactions to a mere question of age:

There was a man who loved me. He was old;  
I could not love him. (360)

The short sentences, the absence of coordination, the monosyllabic lines all conspire to give the final verdict (“I could not love him”) an aspect of self-evidence. Yet the value of the negative modal (“could not”) is far from clear: does Deirdre mean that she could not bring herself to love him? Or does the phrase express a cultural ban, the fact that Conchubar, being “old,” is not eligible as a lover, regardless of his personal merits and of Deirdre’s natural inclinations? For all Conchubar’s inequity, there is a certain heroism in his resistance to a cultural bias which would unsex him for the benefit of younger men. Pushing against ingrained cultural assumptions, he persists for years in claiming his right to pursue love, at the cost of destroying the very object of his desire. In the final lines of the play, his loss is reconfigured as triumph:

Howl if you will; but I, being King, did right  
In choosing her most fitting to be Queen,  
And letting no boy lover take the sway. (388)

Although he is defeated in the end, the *senex amans* is granted the final words of the play, and allowed to voice his fierce rejection of the culture’s ban on aged sexuality and agency.

Perhaps the most unequivocally negative *senex* type is to be found in Yeats’s *At the Hawk’s Well* (first performed in 1916, and published in 1917). This “Play for Dancers” picks up the opposition between youth and old age already prominent in the plays I have just discussed, replaying it as the confrontation of the allegorical Young Man and Old Man. The Young Man (later revealed as Cuchulain) has come to the eponymous Hawk’s well to seek immortality, an illusory quest for which the Old Man has sacrificed his entire life; but when the Guardian of the well comes alive and invites Cuchulain into a dance, he chooses to follow her away from the flowing well, confronting the terror of an otherworldly embrace, fully and heroically endorsing his mortal condition rather than enduring it passively in sterile idleness. The Old Man is constructed as a foil to Cuchulain’s youthful audacity; in his desperate attempt to preserve his life he has wasted it away, and now blames everyone for his failure to live a significant life—the Guardian of the well, the unearthly “dancers” who have cheated him time and again, and the Young Man who might steal his due of the miraculous water when it comes. The *senex iratus* is reconfigured as the Nietzschean “man of resentment,”<sup>5</sup> fuming against the whole world in his frustration but failing to realise that he is its sole artisan. His anger and vulnerability are expressed in terms of a grotesque physicality:

First Musician [*speaking*]. That old man climbs up hither,  
Who has been watching by his well

These fifty years.  
He is all doubled up with age;  
The old thorn-trees are doubled so  
Among the rocks where he is climbing. (VPI 401)

The “doubled up” body of the Old Man encapsulates the poetic principle of the whole passage, in which the laboriousness of his progress is suggested by the systematic “doubling” of words (“That old man” / “The old thorn-trees”; “doubled up” / “doubled so”; “climbs up hither” / “he is climbing”) as well as by the doubling of mimesis (the silent movements of the actor on the stage) by diegesis (the Musician’s narrative).<sup>6</sup> While the latter point is a recurrent feature of Yeats’s dramaturgy, in this particular instance it contributes to the construction of the grotesque, exhausted physicality of the Old Man, creating a redundancy, a ponderousness also inscribed in the prosodic gracelessness of the plodding tetrameters. The play thus invites a very critical reception of the Old Man, revisiting the type of the *senex iratus* and its grotesque avatars in the *comedia dell’arte* to abject the ridiculous, life-denying “man of resentment” and glorify instead the adventurous Young Man—although in the final lyric both are regarded with a degree of irony. This harsh treatment of the *senex*, uncharacteristic within Yeats’s dramatic corpus, comes at a critical time in his personal life, when he may have felt that the time had come for him to embrace the part, though he clearly wasn’t ready for it: significantly, within a few months of the first staging of *At the Hawk’s Well* on 2 April 1916, Yeats, then in his early fifties, was to propose unsuccessfully to the twenty-two-year-old Iseult Gonne (after being rejected once more by her mother), then to marry the twenty-five year-old George Hyde-Lees.

However, when Yeats reiterated his experiment with comic masks and the grotesque imagination in his portrayal of the Old Men in *The Player Queen*, a play started in 1907 as a tragedy but reconfigured as farce and first performed in 1919 (three years after *At the Hawk’s Well*), he revisited the comic type of the *senex* to a very different effect. The final version of this enigmatic, mock-philosophical farce, in which Yeats both allegorizes and parodies his doctrine of the Mask, opens with a comic prologue, a dialogue between two Old Men who are “leaning from the upper windows, one on either side of the street” and who, unlike any other character in the play, “wear grotesque masks” (VPI 715). Katharine Worth detects a parody of Maeterlinck in this scene, “where the Maeterlinckian world of towers and queens and castles glimmers faintly through an alien, sardonic context,” and also sees the passage as anticipating O’Casey’s “sardonic double turns.”<sup>7</sup> Curiously, she does not mention Beckett, although the passage contains in seed all the hilarity and pathos of his grotesque dramaturgy of the failing body. Anticipating the old couple sticking out

of their dustbins in *Endgame*, only the trunks and heads of the old men are visible, and they are placed just sufficiently wide apart that communication is possible but laborious. The action and dialogue are ritualised; presumably Yeats's Old Men meet every day at daybreak to scrutinize the streets of their town and appraise their physical deficiencies: one of the two Old Men has "better sight," the other "better hearing," but they join forces in their effort to assess the situation, complementing each other in the manner of the proverbial Blind Man and Lamé Man in *The Cat and the Moon*. They have stepped out of the public arena and no longer participate in the life of the city, but are mere spectators of the agitation of public affairs which they leave to "the young and the middle-aged" (VPI 716). At the close of the scene, they leave the stage entirely and return to darkness, like puppets to their boxes ("we had best pull in our heads" [716]), for fear they might be implicated in the violent events which are underway in those revolutionary times. Clearly, they have internalized society's attempt to marginalise them to such extent that they withdraw in terror and perform a pantomime of anticipated death and burial: "better shut the windows and pretend to be asleep" (716-17).

The compliance of the two Old Men in *The Player Queen* is unusual in the Yeatsian canon, but the play, with its emphasis on physicality and the politics of (self-) marginalisation it engages, surreptitiously points out the ageist ethos which Yeats identified as a feature of modernity. Elsewhere, in a more tragic vein, Yeats's angry old men do not accept their declining condition passively but rage against the world and the younger generations who would keep them out of it. In these plays, Yeats's *senex iratus* takes after Oedipus and Lear, those tragic heroes for whom the experience of extreme "bodily decrepitude" is the path to a form of alternative "wisdom," expressed as rage against all attempts at silencing and disempowering them.

## II

Yeats translated *Oedipus at Colonus*, the tragedy of the blind old king-turned-beggar on the threshold of death, after the publication of the first version of *A Vision* in 1925, and the play opened at the Abbey in September 1927. Three years later, after seeing Denis Johnston's production of *King Lear*, he wrote to Lady Gregory in annoyance: "An elaborate verse play is beyond our people. If I dared I would put 'King Lear' into modern English" (CL *InteLex* #5398). This never happened, but when the BBC broadcast a reading of *Oedipus at Colonus* in 1931, Yeats brought together the two heroes in his introductory talk, declaring (somewhat inaccurately): "Oedipus...wanders an outcast from road to road, a blind old man, attended and protected by his two daughters as Lear was protected by Cordelia. So great has been his suffering that the gods have come over



to his side and those that he curses perish, and those that he blesses prosper" (CW2 891). No such consolation is granted to Lear, who dies of heartbreak, yet both heroes are stretched out "upon the rack of this tough world,"<sup>8</sup> and respond to the horror of their fate by rejecting the posture of the wise old man which would be forced upon them, and embracing instead "an old man's frenzy" (VP 576). Finding himself doubly marginalised at the end of his life, as a member of the displaced Anglo-Irish Protestant elite with whom he identified and as an old man, Yeats found in the "rage" of the old heroes a radically subversive posture which allowed him to resist marginalisation and absorption within the new order. Encompassing both extreme anger and "frenzy" or madness—Lear's self-diagnosed "hysterica passio," a phrase Yeats used to describe his own fits of rage<sup>9</sup>—rage occurs in his plays as a modality of political and existential resistance, the deeply histrionic posture which allows the redundant, dispossessed old man to remain on the stage and deflect all attempts at containment.

One particularly pernicious "ageist" strategy that Yeats's plays identify is that which consists in forcing the old person into the posture of wisdom—the philosophical "sage" who reins in his passions and renounces his ambitions, both sexual and political. While Yeats, especially in the final decade of his life, became increasingly fascinated with the figure of the sage as a philosophical and poetic ideal,<sup>10</sup> his plays of the same period reveal a contrary defiance towards the compulsory wisdom routinely imposed on old people as a means of containment. This is an old ploy, which appears both in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*. Should Oedipus, who is at death's door, not be buried in Thebes, whence he was expelled in shame by his brother-in-law Creon, it has been prophesied that Thebes should be destroyed. Creon therefore attempts to persuade Oedipus to follow him back to Thebes, but when Oedipus refuses him he chides him for his stubbornness: "Do you want everybody to know, miserable old man, that age has not brought you sense? Do you want to make yourself a byword?" (VPI 875) A few moments later, however, Theseus, the King of Athens, makes the same point to shame Creon: "you who are old and should have learnt wisdom, you have brought disgrace upon an honourable city" (880). The Chorus, finally, attempts to coax Oedipus into a posture of stoic acceptance of imminent death:

Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span;  
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied aged man;  
Delight becomes death-longing if all longing else be vain. (887)

The wise old man is a highly respectable figure in Greek antiquity, yet Sophocles' play highlights Oedipus' heroic resistance to such discourse. He embraces death serenely, but not before cursing Creon, his sons and his former city, bringing the revenge of the gods against them. In *King Lear*, Goneril resorts

to the same rhetorical ploy to curb her father's unruly disposition: "As you are old and reverend, should be wise"<sup>11</sup>—an admonition echoed in jest by the Fool who chides Lear for having been old "before [his] time": "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise."<sup>12</sup> Lear's tragic grandeur lies in his refusal to "be wise"; although he accomplishes nothing, he opens his eyes to the destitution of his former subjects and to the utter vulnerability of human beings embodied in the pitiful figure of Poor Tom, and, in his relentless raging, voices a radical critique of the values upheld by the generation of young cynics he has placed on the throne.

Rage, indeed, is often directed against the hero's descendants, those children in whose name he is expected to bridle his own needs and desires. The blind, old Oedipus who seeks refuge at Colonus cherishes the two daughters who have supported him in affliction, but sends off Polyneices, his treacherous son, with a terrible curse. Yeats's translation follows the original text closely and has Oedipus reflexively describe the linguistic act of cursing as he is performing it—"carry my curses away"; "I call..."; "Go, carry away these words," bringing out the destructive efficiency of the curse which performatively undoes his filial relationship with Polyneices ("son that I have made no son") and sends him off to death (890). On the contrary, part of the pathos attached to Lear's raging comes from the fact that his imprecations against his "pelican daughters" are completely ineffectual, the expression of impotence and frustration. Significantly, he curses Goneril not with imminent death but with "sterility," calling upon Nature to "Dry up in her the organs of increase, / And from her derogate body never spring / A babe to honour her!"<sup>13</sup> This fantasy of destroying not just his offspring, but future generations, is then amplified into the apocalyptic nightmare of the storm scene, when Lear calls upon the raging elements to wipe out the possibility of generation itself: "Crack nature's mould, all germens spill at once / That make ungrateful man!"<sup>14</sup>

In Yeats's plays the old man's rage at being displaced by younger generations sometimes leads to murderous extremities. One early play, in particular, dramatizes the disastrous consequences of society's attempt to contain older generations by enjoining them to be "wise" and repress their vital instincts. In *On Baile's Strand* (1903), Cuchulain, who up to now has been running wild, is coerced into taking an oath of allegiance to Conchubor. Cuchulain at first refuses to take the oath:

Cuchulain: I'll not be bound...

If time had not put water in your blood,  
You never would have thought it.

Conchubor: I would leave  
A strong and settled country to my children. (VPI 477-79)

The issue of age is central to the debate. The aging process is encapsulated by the image of “water in [the] blood,” which suggests the declining of vital forces, the cooling of passions that Cuchulain recognises in Conchubar but refuses to embrace for his own sake, claiming a right to the intensity and recklessness of youth. Conchubar’s reply, however, points out that Cuchulain is in fact no longer a young man; his concern is the welfare of the next generation, for whom Cuchulain’s “turbulence” (493) constitutes a threat. When all the kings join in to support Conchubar’s demand, Cuchulain finally gives in and takes the oath, conceding: “It’s time the years put water in my blood / And drowned the wildness of it” (493). In *On Baile’s Strand*, of course, Cuchulain is not yet an old man (in fact the whole point of the Cuchulain narrative is that he never gets to be one, since he has chosen an early death as the price for everlasting fame); yet the oath materialises the manifold discursive strategies used to constrain older generations in order to promote the interests of the young. The structuring irony of the play is that by renouncing his own youth in order to protect Conchubar’s children, Cuchulain is driven, tragically, to kill his own son.

In terms of plot the infanticide is the direct consequence of the oath, which compels Cuchulain to fight the Young Man against his will, unaware that he is his father. At an unconscious level, however, the killing of the Young Man is motivated ideologically in terms of a preoccupation with the decay of the race: the sense that the next generation must of necessity be lesser than the present one, that “descent” will inevitably mean decline. Between the 1860s and the 1890s, concern about the supposed dangers of miscegenation and the resulting “degeneration” of the white race, was popularized by the works of Max Nordau, Cesare Lombroso, Oswald Spengler and many others, and in Ireland, this nexus of anxieties was absorbed into the gothic narrative of the decline of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.<sup>15</sup> This preoccupation, which runs through the Yeatsian canon, is couched in mythical terms in *On Baile’s Strand*. At first Cuchulain is unaware that he has a son, and in the early moments of the play he denies having ever wanted one

that marred me in the copying  
As I have that clean hawk out of the air  
That, as men say, begot this body of mine upon a mortal woman. (VPI 485)

Being half-god, half human, Cuchulain has already “marred” the perfection of the godly hawk, and any child of his must continue this catastrophic descent into humanity. In his essay on Yeats and disability, Joseph Valente identifies a conflict between Yeats’s advocacy of a eugenicist ideology, most stridently articulated in *On the Boiler* but already present in many earlier prose pieces, and his relentless exploration of versions of himself as a mentally and physically disabled old man, who participates in the degeneration of the race. “It is surprising,” Valente

writes, “that the double-vision Yeats bore of himself at this point, as both superior and abject, does not seem to have aroused in him any intense cognitive dissonance. After all, he was regularly propounding an aesthetic and an ethos of human disqualification at a time when he was most vulnerable for such disqualification, most subject to the physical and/or mental disability that was its ‘master trope.’”<sup>16</sup> Valente suggests that this aporia is resolved in Yeats’s division of labour, between the non-fiction prose works in which his eugenicist views are expressed unambiguously, and the creative works which accommodate and often celebrate versions of the abject Yeats and his poetic or dramatic avatars. Picking up on Valente’s argument, I would suggest that the “aporia” he identifies is in fact at the very core of the dramatic conflict in *On Baile’s Strand*, and finds its tragic expression in Cuchulain’s accidental infanticide. Cuchulain both performs the “ethos of human disqualification” inherent in his lamenting of the decay of the race and, by destroying his own progeny, identifies himself as tainted by the threat of degeneracy—a point vividly proved by the blind rage in the grips of which he commits the murder, the dramatic equivalent of the fits of madness which Yeats saw himself as being prone to. However, I argue that the murder of the Young Man can also be read in a more positive light, not as a self-punishing gesture, but as Cuchulain’s raging response against the younger generation in whose name he has been made to take the oath and renounce his youthful freedom. In the symbolic economy of the play, the Young Man is a sacrificial substitute for Conchubar’s sons, who must be protected at all cost to ensure the stability of the kingdom. By killing him, Cuchulain unconsciously resists the ageist agenda of the culture he inhabits, and refuses to be restrained and disempowered for the sake of the puny generation that must come after his own.

Similar concerns recur much more explicitly in Yeats’s penultimate play, *Purgatory* (1938), where the Old Man’s murder of his son, which repeats his earlier murder of his father, is meant to cut short the polluted lineage started by his aristocratic mother when she married a commoner, and to put an end to her endless reliving of her sins. Yet again, the fear of degeneration overlaps with a more fundamental intergenerational conflict. We first see the Old Man through the eyes of the Young Man. “Study that tree, what is it like?” the Old Man asks his son as they arrive on the site of the burned house, to which the Boy replies, “A silly old man” (*VPI* 1041), implicitly comparing the old gnarled tree to his father’s grotesquely bent body. Emulating Lear’s daughters, he then abjects his father into the indignity of senility (“you are mad!” [1045]), before attempting to grab his bag of money, even threatening him with physical violence:

What if I killed you? You killed my grand-dad  
Because you were young and he was old.  
Now I am young and you are old. (1047)

In his brutality the Young Man cuts through the ideological smokescreen of the play’s eugenicist discourse and reveals the underlying conflict, an on-going struggle to the death between young and old for the control of material resources. The passage makes shockingly visible the insidious violence which modernity perpetrates against the aged by displacing them from the sphere of economic and financial exchanges. For all its eugenicist, crypto-fascist connotations, the Old Man’s infanticide also performs a radical form of resistance to a modern ageist culture which found an extreme manifestation in the fascist cult of youth.

The rage expressed by Yeats’s tragic old men, which transmutes into actual infanticide Oedipus’ and Lear’s curses against their progeny, is thus characteristically ambivalent, both self-punishing (as an assault against one’s unworthy descent) and self-preserving (as a act of resistance to marginalisation). In his final play, however, Yeats returns to a comic strategy and rehabilitates the *senex iratus*, in all his grotesque ineptitude, as a legitimate double of the playwright, reviving the irascible clown who had appeared in a much earlier play.

### III

The first version of *The King’s Threshold*, first produced by the Irish National Theatre Society in October 1903, opened with a farcical prologue spoken by a decrepit Old Man dressed in “a red dressing-gown, red slippers and red nightcap” (VPI 313). This attire, which bespeaks advanced senescence, conjures up both the clowning tradition and the character of Pantalone in the *comedia dell’arte*, who is traditionally dressed in red. The Old Man speaks not in his own name but, he claims, merely repeats the words he has been taught by his nephew, a member of the cast who turned to him when no one else was available. His monologue constructs a fiction of disempowerment and coercion, whereby the infantilized Old Man is deprived of his own voice and trained to repeat the words of others: “I’ve got to speak the prologue,” “my nephew said,” “I am to say,” etc. Even the fictitious nephew, however, defers to the higher authority of “the poet”: “But as to the big play you are to see tonight, my nephew told me to say what the poet had taught him to say about it” (*Ibid.*). The effect, of course, is burlesque, the sacrosanct word of “the poet” completely deflected by multiple, undignified mediation and distorted by the trivial diction of the Old Man. The authority of the poet is further undermined when the Old Man pursues, “And as to what happened to Seanchan after, my nephew told me he didn’t know, and the poet didn’t know, and it’s likely there’s nobody that knows” (*Ibid.*). Although the Old Man is farcical in his staged senility, the joke is on Yeats himself, the autocratic but ultimately incompetent poet behind the scenes. While he appears to defer to the poet, duly repeating the lines he has been taught, the

Old Man surreptitiously subverts his authority and progressively introduces a counter-discourse of his own, a rambling, uncontrolled discourse of the ageing body in pain which insinuates itself in the cracks of sanctioned speech. His costume (the nightgown, slippers and nightcap) already performs such a breach of decorum, bringing into the public space of the theater the pathological private body of an old man at bedtime. In the early moments of the Prologue the Old Man, who has been putting on an act of total deference to received instructions, interrupts himself to adjust the curtain: "Wait a bit, there's a draught here," he says, again inviting the frail, suffering body of old age onto the stage of high drama.

After he has duly exposed the plot, a trumpet sounds, signalling to him that it is time to leave the stage, but this time the Old Man refuses to be contained, and bursts into a raging rant about the "great ladies and great gentlemen" in the audience who ignore the painful realities of old age, "as if there was no such thing in the world as cold in the shoulders, and speckled shins, and the pains in the bones and the stiffness in the joints that make an old man that has the whole load of the world on him ready for his bed" (313–14). Refusing to leave the stage to the young and powerful, the Old Man instead claims this space of visibility for himself and the grotesque ailments of his ageing body, before trailing off into an indistinct mumble. The inconclusive end of the speech completely subverts the controlled rhetoric that he has been trained to reproduce and leaves open a space for discursive divergence. This is in fact a very apt introduction to the play itself, which also dramatizes a conflict between authority and the rambling counter-discourse of a man at death's door.

At surface level, Seanchan, the fictional poet who starves on the King's threshold to vindicate the value of poetry, is a double of the "poet" mentioned in the prologue, and a spokesman for Yeats himself. Yet in the early, comic version of the play, he is in fact also replicated in the figure of the grotesque Old Man, although the two apparently bear little resemblance. What brings them together most forcefully is that they are both standing on the verge of death, the eponymous threshold: the Old Man is nearing the end of his natural lifespan, and Seanchan, by virtue of his hunger strike, has almost exhausted his vital strength. Paradoxically, this both exposes them to extreme physical weakness and suffering, and frees them from the constraints of decorum and propriety, endowing them with an extraordinary power of subversion in the face of abusive authority. Seanchan's hunger strike is a public performance of contestation of King Gaire's decision to exclude poets from the great council of the State. As he exposes his weakening body to the crowd, thus making visible the symbolic violence perpetrated by the monarch on the artists, his speech is progressively loosened, so that by the end of the play, as the Mayor says in the 1921 version, "he is delirious" (299): literally, straying off the furrow ("lira" in Latin)

of orthodox speech to voice the artist’s truth, his imprescriptible right to participate in the life of the city as the bearer of a counter-hegemonic discourse. While Seanchan grounds his legitimacy in his performance of starvation, the Old Man likewise claims visibility and audibility in the public sphere by theatricalising his bodily infirmities, asserting against all social conventions that “bodily decrepitude is wisdom” (VP 523) and refusing the ageist, ableist consensus which would confine him to parroting or to silence.

When Yeats revised the play in 1921, after Terence McSwiney’s fatal hunger strike, he followed his initial instinct, which had been to write the play as a tragedy,<sup>17</sup> had Seanchan die at the end and suppressed the Prologue, whose ostensible function had been to justify the comic ending (CW2 686). The Old Man, however, must have kept raging in the wings, and he resurfaces vociferously in Yeats’s final play, *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), written when Yeats himself was on death’s threshold. This time, the angry Old Man is an explicit figure of the playwright. Although he affects to be bound to a higher authority (“I have been asked to produce a play,” “when they told me I could have my own way”), he clearly positions himself as a living anachronism and hence as a force of subversion of the values of the time: “I have been selected,” he claims, “because I am out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the thing is made of.” (VPI 1051). As in the earlier play, the Old Man’s alleged senility frees him from the restrictions of propriety, while an external signal attempts to contain his bouts of rage:

If there are more than a hundred I won’t be able to escape people who are educating themselves out of the book societies and the like, sciologists all, pick-pockets and opinionated bitches...

*[Drum and pipe behind the scene, then silence]*

That’s from the musicians; I asked them to do that if I was getting excited. If you were as old you would find it easy to get excited. (1052)

Just like the trumpet-blast in the earlier play, the “drum and pipe” objectify the authoritative discourse of rationality, which the Old Man pretends to have so well internalised that he claims responsibility for the arrangement. His excitability, however, is not to be so easily contained, and he soon succumbs again to a fit of *hysterica passio*, vituperating against the philistines who have taken over the arts and degraded them beyond recognition. Constructed as an emblem of the old dispensation, the decrepit Anglo-Irish elite now displaced by an emerging class of middle-class boors, the Old Man is the grotesque counterpart of Cuchulain, but while the exhausted hero embraces death, it is left to the



comic *senex*, in his grotesque, raging senescence, to perform a radical rejection of the hegemonic values of the time. Refusing the guise of the wise old man, Yeats masquerades instead as the *senex iratus* whose histrionic gesticulations ensure that he will never be digested by the new order, but will remain a force of disturbance. As a senator and a “smiling public man” working within the institutional framework, the aging Yeats had found that he had in fact very limited effective power. Standing at death’s door, he finds an alternative mode of resistance in the grotesque physicality and “savage indignation” of the comic *senex*, whose unrelenting performance of age and rage on the stage makes him the legitimate, heroic double of the furious Cuchulain.

I have argued that Yeats found in drama a medium particularly well suited to express his preoccupation with old age, and to experiment with modes of resistance against ageist strategies of containment. While his endorsement of the figures of raging old men is most often associated with the late poems, an examination of his drama reveals that this was in fact a lifelong concern, which Yeats pursued with constantly renewed inventiveness, reshaping the venerable *senex* which runs throughout the canon of Western drama into a radical figure of subversion. In doing so, Yeats also challenges the gender politics of his time, and refuses to endorse uncritically the nationalist ideal of virile self-containment promoted as “manliness,”<sup>18</sup> allowing instead his unruly, raging old men to claim full visibility and audibility both on and off the stage of the theater.

### Notes

1. I borrow this distinction from Kathleen Woodward, “Against Wisdom: the Social Politics of Anger and Aging,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 17 (2003), 55–67, 65, n. 4.
2. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1957, 1990), 172.
3. Gruman, G. J., “Cultural Origins of Present-Day ‘Age-ism’: the Modernization of the Life Cycle,” in *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology*, edited by S. Spicker, K. Woodward, and D. Van Tassel (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 359–387.
4. In the English context see for instance Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, transl. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 2007), 21 et *passim*.
6. See Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright. Modernism, Anti-Theatricality & Drama* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2002, 2011), 130–33.
7. Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1978, 2013), 155.
8. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1997), 391.
9. See Peter T. Higginson, “‘Down Hysterica Passio’: A Sketch of the Mood-Structure of W. B. Yeats,” *Irish University Review* 28–2 (Autumn/Winter, 1998), 272–280.
10. On this point see in particular Matthew Gibson, *Yeats, Coleridge and the Romantic Sage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).
11. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, 205.

12. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, 215.
13. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, 208.
14. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, *op. cit.*, 263–64.
15. See Seamus Deane, “Yeats and Degeneration,” in *Studies on W. B. Yeats*, ed. Jacqueline Genet (Paris: CNRS, 1989), 209–222. Though Yeats only started reading Spengler in 1925, anxieties relating to degeneration had long since permeated Irish culture.
16. Joseph Valente, “Yeats, Age, and Disability.” Lecture delivered at the International Yeats Summer School, Sligo, August 2015. I am very grateful to Joseph Valente for letting me read this lecture prior to publication.
17. See Yeats’s note to the revised version, CW2, 686.
18. See Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

**“EASTER, 1916” AT ITS CENTENNIAL:  
MAUD GONNE, AUGUSTA GREGORY AND  
THE EVOLUTION OF THE POEM**

*James Pethica*

“Easter, 1916,” the best-known literary work responding to the Irish Rising of 24–30 April 1916, includes the date “September 25th, 1916” at the foot of the text in all canonical printings—this being the first time Yeats permanently so identified a poem’s completion to a specific day.<sup>1</sup> When writing a new poem, he would frequently mention this in letters to friends, and often sent partial or even full working drafts to his closest confidantes. But in this instance, after telling John Quinn and Lady Gregory in May 1916 of his plans to write about “the men executed,” his letters are notably silent on the subject over the following four months; and, additionally, no early drafts of “Easter, 1916” survive.<sup>2</sup> Yeats read a version of the poem to Maud Gonne in Normandy in late August 1916, but the first surviving manuscript is a full draft, with substantive revisions only to the final stanza, and dated September 25—on which day he was at Coole Park with Lady Gregory.<sup>3</sup> As this essay will show, that dating was not accidental and quietly acknowledges Gregory’s significant share in the poem’s birth.

**I**

Readings of “Easter, 1916” have typically centered on its conflicted response to the military action taken by Irish Nationalists in the Rising, and on the uneasy mix it embodies of desire for and distancing from Maud Gonne—long his beloved, but now newly-widowed following the execution of John MacBride. The political and the personal are indeed deeply interconnected in the poem. Its core uncertainty, after all, is whether “excess of love,” in the form of patriotism or in unwavering desire for a beloved, is admirable—the precondition, in fact, for a transformation of the self, or of a nation—or whether, in its obsessive single-mindedness, such “excess” is inimical to humanity and turns the heart into “a stone.”

But the compositional history of “Easter, 1916” over the five months between the events it considers, and its completion, shows how Gonne’s influence on the poem was repeatedly offset and complicated by that of Augusta Gregory. Gregory’s essay “What was their Utopia?”—along with other writings she sent him—offered a crucial counter to Gonne in inflecting Yeats’s view of what had

taken place. The essay was written in May 1916 but is published here for the first time.<sup>4</sup> Gregory was closely implicated, too, in Yeats's personal conflicts during the writing of the poem. In his deliberations over whether to again propose to Gonne, he actively recruited Gregory—his closest friend and advisor, and, as he later termed her, "my strength and my conscience"<sup>5</sup>—to hold him to his resolve not to marry "unless Maud Gonne gave up all politics."<sup>6</sup>

That "Easter, 1916" registers the competing influence of these two powerful women on Yeats is unsurprising. He had by this point long come to associate them as polar opposites in the functioning of his creative and emotional economy. Other pivotal women in his life would complicate or augment this core binary—with Olivia Shakespear being to the fore—and then later supersede it. But in his love poems written for or in response to Gonne up to 1917, when he married, Gregory routinely features, directly or indirectly, as a practical and emotional counterweight to Gonne, his nominal focus. Defining and articulating what he felt about Gonne almost always involved a characteristic Yeatsian division of sensibility, and he was most able to assert her singularity when comparing her with someone quite unlike her. He repeatedly represented Gregory in his writings, often quite schematically, as the orderly, supportive, nurturing friend, whose attributes were the antithesis to those of Gonne. Maud is the dangerous and alluring muse whose influence on him is creatively and erotically powerful, but also threatening, "wild" and "troubling."<sup>7</sup> She motivates Yeats to write, partly because she is unattainable and unconstrainable, and partly because she thereby productively challenges his sense of his own autonomy. Gregory, by contrast, enables rather than threatens, by providing material and psychological support, the all-important "peace" of Coole Park<sup>8</sup>—for Yeats, an image of fixity, tradition and creative nurturance—and a pragmatic, utilitarian perspective that cautions him against the dangers of an alluring sublimity. His sonnet "The Folly of Being Comforted," written in 1901, is a paradigmatic early example. Gonne—with "all the wild summer in her gaze"—inspires intense feeling, while Gregory is the reality principle who critiques, counsels patience and urges the value of thought over feeling (VP 199–200). The sonnet's energy comes, in characteristically Yeatsian fashion, from a debate between two systems of value, neither of which can be fully endorsed, and neither of which can stand alone; and each is directly associated with the contrary claims made on him by Gonne and Gregory.

As "Easter, 1916" approaches its centennial, a fuller account of its genesis is due, to show how deeply resonant the poem is with, and how substantially the product of, the conjunction and clash of Yeats's personal and political responses to the two women then most important in his life.

## II

Yeats was in London when the Rising began, and had spent barely more than a week in Dublin during the previous year. Tight censorship in the British press meant that he was at first significantly reliant for news on the reports sent from Ireland by his sister Lily, and then, once regular mail service was resumed from Galway, by Lady Gregory, his most frequent and substantive correspondent. As he recognized and acknowledged at once, her letters to him were of “historical importance.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite their differing forms of political acuity, the Rising came as a complete surprise both to Gregory and to Yeats. His initial reaction was quite circumspect, although that caution may have owed something to his expectation that his letters would be opened by censors. Writing to her on 27 April, in his first surviving mention of the uprising, he merely regretted “a tragic business that will leave Ireland different for a long time & affect our work a good deal,” before moving quickly on to give an account of new bathroom fittings at his London apartment.<sup>10</sup> The comment recognizes that what had happened would likely have significant consequences for the Abbey Theatre and for his own and Gregory’s creative work, but it doesn’t as yet envisage the “tragic business” as radically transformative—it would merely make things “different for a long time” rather than changing them utterly. In a note written the same day to his one-time and perhaps current lover, Alick Schepeler, Yeats made no mention of the Rising, and over the following week his few references to the unfolding events express uncertainty about “how this rebellion will effect all our interests,” caution in drawing conclusions from “wild rumours” and a ready admission that he was fundamentally unsure how to respond: “the whole thing bewilders me.”<sup>11</sup>

Gregory’s first letter to him from Galway, on 27 April, reports on Volunteer operations in the region, but acknowledges that she, too, at this point had no reliable news of events in Dublin other than rumours of “slaughter.” But in contrast to Yeats’s caution, her letter concludes by envisioning British reprisals against the Rising in decisive and revealing terms: “It is terrible to think of the executions or killings that are sure to come—yet it must be so—We had been at the mercy of a rabble for a long time, both here & in Dublin, with no apparent policy, but ready to take any opportunity of helping on mischief.”<sup>12</sup> Having been threatened, along with some of her tenants, by local armed bands who identified themselves opportunistically as “Volunteers,” she had come to regard Sinn Féin predominantly as a force for uncertainty and destabilization, and incommensurate with her own moderate constitutional Nationalism. At first, then, Gregory’s conservative instincts in favour of law and order and property rights, and the self-interest this inevitably involved for her as a landowner, was

sufficient to categorically outweigh her by then long-standing support for Irish Home Rule.

Nonetheless, she immediately understood that the insurrection had fundamentally called into question the value of her own and Yeats's efforts of literary nationalism. In an as-yet unpublished meditation titled “The Tragedy of Ireland,” begun around 4 May 1916, she reflected on the losses to Irish culture the previous year—when the death of her nephew, Hugh Lane, seemed to have ended his efforts to found a Dublin Gallery of Modern Art—and on the massive damage now resulting from the Rising. The forces which had drawn her into the Irish literary movement in the late 1890s—“the rebirth of the language and of literature”—had still seemed “new but a week ago,” she noted; but “even as I was writing these pages...they have been thrown back, made but a background, out of date, out of fashion, by that tragic, terrible vanity, the Sinn Féin rising.”<sup>13</sup> Feeling “cut off from the world” at Coole and without “letters, papers, or telegrams” to give her news, she was, she told Yeats on 27 April, “reading straight through Shelley.”<sup>14</sup>

Once she began to find out more about what had happened, and who was involved, however, Gregory's viewpoint quickly shifted, complicating and undercutting both her instinctive antipathy to the “rabble” and her dismissal of Rising as motivated by a “terrible vanity.” On 7 May 1916 she made a first clear distinction to Yeats between the political idealism of the insurrection's leaders and the violence of mere opportunists: “I am sorry for Pearse and McDonough, the only ones I knew among the leaders—they were enthusiasts—The looting and brutality were by the rank & file I fancy.”<sup>15</sup> It is a judgement laden with elitist class assumptions: characteristically, Gregory was willing to credit the “leaders” she knew personally with high-minded motives, while only the nameless “rank and file” had descended to “looting and brutality.” But this tension between deploring violence and finding a loftier dimension in the otherwise dangerous impulsiveness of “enthusiasts” would become the core consideration in her writings in the weeks ahead. As she wrote to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt on 21 May, she saw “the whole affair through as it were two different glasses,” with her recoil from the “terror” of disorder never outweighing her recognition of the transformative implications of what the Rising's leaders had accomplished.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, she was also quick to recognize the extent to which their direct action indicted her own and Yeats's literary and cultural incrementalism: “Beside them we seem a little insincere, we have all given in to compromise.”<sup>17</sup>

### III

Offsetting Gregory's perspective, however, were the letters Yeats also received from Gonne in the first two weeks after the Rising. For her, the “sacrifice”

of those who had died had unequivocally “raised the Irish cause again to a position of tragic dignity” (G-YL 372). Both the “shelling and destruction” in Dublin and the hasty executions which were taking place in her view made the “cynicism” of British opinion and policy so manifest that she was sure the insurrection would not prove to be “in vain” either practically or politically (G-YL 373–4). After hearing of John MacBride’s execution she wrote decisively to Yeats on 11 May 1916 that “Those who die for Ireland are sacred. Those who enter Eternity by the great door of Sacrifice atone for all—in one moment they do more than all our effort” (G-YL 375). A few days later she insisted that the “deaths of those leaders are full of beauty & romance” and quoted the invocations of the Poor Old Woman in Yeats’s and Gregory’s drama *Cathleen ni Houlihan*—the role she had played in its first productions in 1902—saying that these patriots “will be speaking forever, the people shall hear them forever” (G-YL 377). It was between these competing views of events—Gregory’s “terrible vanity” and Gonne’s mix of “tragic dignity” and “beauty & romance”—that Yeats began to formulate his own early responses to the Rising.

His first mention of “trying to write a poem on the men executed” comes in a letter to Gregory on 11 May—the day before James Connolly and Séan Mac Diarmada became the last participants to be shot. The taut, antinomial phrase at the heart of the finished poem was already present in his mind at this early point, as he summarized his plans in a single phrase: “terrible beauty has been born again.”<sup>18</sup> Two weeks later he told John Quinn he was planning “a group of poems” on the subject, but stressed that he would not actually carry out this intention until he left London and could get “into the country” to write.<sup>19</sup> During a ten week stay at Colleville-sur-Mer in Brittany with Maud Gonne, from late June that summer, he duly completed a full draft of “Easter, 1916.”

It was precisely in the period between Yeats’s first mention of planning to write, and his arrival in France on 22 June 1916, that Lady Gregory’s influence on his response to events was at its height. She sent him her essay “The Tragedy of Ireland”—later published, much revised, as a chapter in her book *Hugh Lane*—some time in mid-May. It highlights the mix of decisiveness and inflexibility that had made Lane successful but also widely disliked, and it extols the “soldier’s direct methods” of another nephew, John Shawe-Taylor, whose interventions had helped bring about the Wyndham Land Act of 1903. (In “Coole Park, 1929” Yeats would term them “impetuous men” and contrast their assertive certainty with his own “timid” vacillations and John Synge’s “meditative” mind [VP 489]). The essay explicitly links the cost of their deaths to Ireland with the loss now caused by the executions of the Rising’s leaders, and meditates—with anxiety and some uncertainty—as to what kind of combination of direct action, creative genius, and reflective capacity would now be needed for the regeneration of Irish culture. Of Pearse and MacDonough, she



wrote: “I would that their passion for our country had left them to use their ‘fragment of life’ in some less bitter way than this which has brought death to many and brought about their own.”<sup>20</sup> If her allusion here was to the subtitle of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, this again highlights her fundamental concern with the competing claims of individual vision and of wider social responsibility and ethics, and with whether action without sufficient consideration of consequences could be justified.

Her letters to Yeats from around mid-May onwards undoubtedly heightened his own personal and political reasons for seeing the Rising, as she did, “through two different glasses”; and they can only have added to his consciousness of the extent to which his work of years had been marginalized. Even if the Rising’s leaders were flawed and the outcome of their actions was “bitter,” Gregory stressed, their decisive action and uncompromising leadership had radically altered the political and imaginative landscape. “It seems as if the leaders were what is wanted in Ireland—& will be even more wanted in the future” she wrote him on 13 May: “a fearless & imaginative opposition to the conventional & opportunist parliamentarians, who have never helped our work even by intelligent opposition.”<sup>21</sup> In a letter to him the following day, she quoted at length from Shelley’s essay “On the Punishment of Death,” concurring with Shelley’s condemnation of capital punishment but also with his recognition of its alluring power as spectacle and in potentially allowing the condemned to claim a form of martyrdom:

He says what is very applicable to this moment: “...The death of what is called a traitor, that is, a person who, from whatever motive would abolish the government of the day, is as often a triumphant exhibition of suffering virtue as the warning of a culprit.”<sup>22</sup>

Like Shelley, she was deeply concerned that “reason” and restraint should be the basis of just laws that upheld the social order. For her, as him, passionate feeling was seductive but ultimately dangerous. Shelley’s essay lists “love, patriotism” and “revenge” as motivations that can readily become “a passion and a duty to be pursued and fulfilled, even to the destruction of those to which [they] originally tended.”<sup>23</sup>

#### IV

The most important document Lady Gregory sent Yeats during this period, however, is her essay “What was their Utopia?,” dated 16 May 1916. She mailed him a typescript copy on 29 May, stressing “don’t delay in reading enclosed,” and urged him, if he judged that “it should be printed, and would be taken,” to

“send it on to the Nation.”<sup>24</sup> She had written the essay, she added, to try and help prevent the possible execution of her long-time friend, the Irish language and history scholar Eoin MacNeill.<sup>25</sup> In the volatile political climate of the moment, the essay was refused, and remained unpublished.<sup>26</sup>

“What was their Utopia?” opens with resonant echoes of the “rumour” and rebellion in the Prologue of Shakespeare’s *2 Henry IV*. The essay centers on Gregory’s uncertainty whether the Rising’s leaders had given to their high-minded plans a true “intensity of thought” and the “reasoning” needed to discipline feeling and individual motivation into coherent principles. If not, the essay worries, their call in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic for “religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens” might be merely utopian, and not a sufficient basis for laws that might “bring the serenity of order into a long disordered land” (49). Yeats’s uncertainty in “Easter, 1916” whether the rebellion was lucid in its motivations or merely a “dream” closely follows this concern. For him, however, the grounds of the leaders’ plans were by then less important than their results: “enough to know they dreamed and are dead.”<sup>27</sup>

But the essay’s initial uncertainty and the interrogative mode of its title are quickly offset and complicated by Gregory’s emphatic conviction that the leaders of the Rising were unquestionably “poets.” Through their “vision” and the decisive sacrifice of their lives they had, for her, unquestionably accessed a deeper level of insight (49–50). Gregory shies from stating explicitly that they had, thereby, become the poet-legislators Shelley had called for in his “Defence of Poetry,” but the pull of this underlying conviction is clear in her quotation of Walt Whitman’s claim in “As I walk the Broad Majestic Days” that “the visions of poets” are “the most solid announcements of any.” She cites, too, from “The Mask of Anarchy,” in which Shelley placed poetry centrally as one of the essential keys to freedom:

Science, Poetry and Thought  
Are thy lamps, they make the lot  
Of the dwellers in a cot  
So serene, they curse it not. (49)

Shelley wrote this poem to commemorate and protest the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in which British soldiers had attacked a crowd peacefully campaigning for democratic reform of the corrupt British parliamentary system, killing fifteen and injuring several hundreds in the process. Gregory’s quotation deftly implies that Britain was once again rushing to kill reformers, in a situation where thoughtful compromise would have been best for all. The Peterloo Massacre not only failed to stop reform but fuelled outrage and thus accelerated

political change. Her essay hence suggests that history was repeating itself, with violent suppression being likely to fuel a political backlash against Britain—as indeed it did. Her brief quotation from John Milton's "The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth" (1660) heightens the essay's implied admiration for the Republicanism of the Rising's leaders, but also, perhaps, quietly registers her concern, as a Protestant, as to whether the religious liberty promised in the 1916 Proclamation would indeed be upheld.

Given his own deep Romantic patrimony, Yeats did not need Gregory's promptings to have begun considering the events of Easter week through a Shelleyan lens.<sup>28</sup> But the fact that his closest friend was ready to credit MacDonagh and Pearse with a visionary power that potentially or actually eclipsed his own was surely jarring. Her translations of poems from Pearse's *Suantraithe agus Goltraithe* in "What was their Utopia?" also undoubtedly invited him to reconsider his own earlier dismissals of Pearse, in particular, as "half cracked" (*Life* 1 46). As Gregory crisply notes in the essay, when Pearse had presented Yeats with this slim volume (in 1914) he had regifted the book to her, not least since, "being in Irish," he was unable to read it.<sup>29</sup> Her translations from the poems strategically highlight both Pearse's humanity—she, unlike Yeats, had been on largely cordial terms with him—and his creativity. They hence potentially offered Yeats a dual indictment. He had misjudged Pearse and the Rising's other leaders, politically, personally and creatively, when passing them by with "polite meaningless words"; and his inability to understand Irish had in part underwritten that failure.

As many critics have observed, "Easter, 1916" is at its core an anxious attempt on Yeats's part to reassert his own poetic making as meaningful in the face of a violent transformation that had disrupted his sense of his creative primacy and political acuity. The poem's crucial echo of the phrase "excess of love" from Shelley's "Alastor" suggests a fundamental revisiting on his part of the Romantic assumptions that had fuelled so much of his work. Given that anxiety, it is ironic that Wilfrid Blunt—to whom Gregory also sent a copy of "What was their Utopia?"—judged on first reading "Easter, 1916," that she, rather than Yeats, must have written the poem.<sup>30</sup> This seeming mere flattery on his part is now somewhat more accountable, given the many connections between poem and essay—and given, too, the fact that Blunt had himself in earlier years published poems of hers under his own name.<sup>31</sup>

## V

Gregory's influence on the as-yet-unwritten poem was continued in person when she and Yeats both went to Dublin in the first week of June 1916 and together viewed the destruction in the city. The only account of their meetings

comes in her record of a dinner at which “there was a good deal of talk about the Rising...Yeats spoke against the executions, said England was stupid as usual and ought not, in her own interest, to have ‘allowed them to make their own ballads.’”<sup>32</sup> If he had not already thought of using the ballad tradition of a litany of names to end “Easter, 1916,” her presence now heightened it as a possibility. Nationalist ballads were, by this time, a matter of real expertise for her, with her many essays on the form including “The Fenians of Our Land” (1900).<sup>33</sup> This quotes at length from the 19th-century tradition of memorialising the names of executed patriots, and had likely helped inspire the central invocations in their play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in which those have given their lives for the cause are “remembered for ever.” She began systematically collecting political ballad broadsheets in the late 1890s, compiling two large albums, and Yeats’s annotations to these confirm that he had used them as a resource.<sup>34</sup> By the time she met him in Dublin in June 1916 she had indeed already added to these albums some ballads found on a Sinn Féin Volunteer arrested in Gort just after the Rising.<sup>35</sup> In *The Kiltartan Poetry Book* (1919) she would observe, rather curtly, that Yeats had now “fallen into the tradition” of patriotic ballads—a wording that not only credits her own sense of primacy in the field, but also quietly implies a degree of tutelage on her part, or emulation on his, in his Rising poems such as “The Rose Tree.”<sup>36</sup> Even the framing image for the closing litany in “Easter, 1916,” in which Yeats proclaims that the poet’s part is “to murmur name upon name / As a mother names her child,” may have owed to her translation of Pearse’s lullaby *Crónán mná sléidhe* (“O little mouth”) in “What was their Utopia?” and Gregory’s account there of reading it to her grandchildren as they went to bed. Regardless, Yeats certainly paid heightened attention to Pearse’s writings around this time, sending Maud Gonne at least two of his poems in early June (*G-YL* 381). One of these was likely Pearse’s English-language poem “The Mother,” written shortly before he was shot, which imagines a mother remembering her two sons who have died fighting for Ireland: “I will speak their names to my own heart / In the long nights; / The little names that were familiar once / Round my dead hearth.”<sup>37</sup> If so, this text, too may have contributed to the maternal image in the closing litany of “Easter, 1916.”

## VI

Yeats’s brief visit to Dublin in June 1916 was principally to resolve Abbey Theatre business with Gregory, but he also wanted to consult with her privately about the possibility of proposing, once again, to the newly-widowed Gonne. She endorsed his plans, but with obvious reservations, writing to him on 17 June that she hoped “for the best—but it is hard to say what that might be.”<sup>38</sup> And three days later she acknowledged that she was “anxious & think very

much of you in such a crisis in your life."<sup>39</sup> The letters she sent during his stay in Brittany show that she continued to be a crucial active presence both in that unfolding "crisis" and in the emotional and political triangulation at the centre of "Easter, 1916."

For Yeats, the weeks in France were emotionally turbulent ones. He proposed to Gonne a few days after arriving, only to be firmly refused. And then—in a development which suggests both resentment at this rejection (Gonne, he reported to Gregory, now suddenly seemed "older than she is"<sup>40</sup>) and a fantasy of reclaiming something of the young woman he had failed to win when he had first asked her to marry him in 1891—he within weeks proposed to Gonne's twenty-one-year-old daughter, Iseult, only to be refused again. The episode reflects credit on none of the principals involved; and Gregory's reaction hardly displays much emotional acuity on her part either. Of Yeats's failure with Gonne, she responded that she was "relieved on the whole. I was growing more & more doubtful of the possibility of its going well — it somehow seemed as if it wd separate you from the Ireland you want to work for than bring you nearer." His creative work, rather than his happiness, is tellingly her narrow focus here. And of his speedy substitution of daughter for mother, she rather blithely told him: "I don't think the difference of age an objection, you are young in appearance & in mind & spirit. She may look on you as but a passing friend, but I have always thought it possible another feeling may awake & in that case I see no reason why happiness might not come of it."<sup>41</sup>

But if her counsel in this instance was lacking, her influence was nonetheless forceful in other ways. In mid-August, amidst his conflicted wooing of Iseult, Yeats reported that he was "dealing with the metaphysical sins in a way I learned from you. 'If you do not love so & so enough, do something for them, sacrifice something & you will love them.'"<sup>42</sup> A letter he sent Iseult that October confirms that this mantra was one of "three sayings" he repeated to her often during his stay in Brittany: "to give a value to things or people make a sacrifice for them."<sup>43</sup>

Given the centrality of the idea of "sacrifice" in "Easter, 1916," and the decisive proposition that opens its final section—"Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart"—Yeats's echo of Gregory's mantra during the weeks he drafted the poem is striking. Maud Gonne had stressed the word "sacrifice" to him repeatedly in late April and early May 1916, but always with religious connotations. Her letter of 11 May, for instance, capitalizes "Sacrifice" and unobtrusively calls attention to its etymological connection with the word "sacred."<sup>44</sup> For Gonne, the word served as an unequivocal endorsement for the redemptive power of the action the Rising's leaders had taken. Lady Gregory's use of the term, by contrast, is considerably more pragmatic. Giving up "something" or making "a" sacrifice is, in Yeats's echo of her words, a means to change

one's feelings about another person—a form of self-abnegation which disciplines and heightens one's capacities, but with the deliberate aim of generating more intense forms of connection. It is thus a giving-up which is not only goal-oriented but in one sense quite calculatedly self-serving.

Yeats's echo of Gregory's words might be taken as an effort on his part to persuade himself that he might indeed be able to love Iseult Gonne "enough," amidst his doubts over the propriety of proposing to a young woman thirty years his junior—she was still, he admitted, in her "joyous childhood"<sup>45</sup>—and who was in some respects quite palpably a substitute for the mother who had so often refused him. But given his consistent, vaunting insistence throughout his career on the necessity of imaginative and practical self-assertion—"strength shapes the world about itself" whereas "weakness is shaped about the world" (CL4 9) he had insisted, for instance, to Maud Gonne in 1904, when she was in his view being passive during her battle to effect a legal separation from MacBride—this is not a fully convincing possibility. His repetition of the mantra to Iseult suggests, instead, a wish to persuade her that she could, and should, sacrifice herself to his interest in her.

His private negotiations of these two incommensurate conceptions of "sacrifice" while in Brittany with the Gonnies certainly register in "Easter, 1916." In the rising crescendo of questions the poem poses in its final stanza, the first is the most awkward and the most easily overlooked: "When may it suffice?" Neither Gonne's nor Gregory's viewpoint is endorsed here. Some degree of sacrifice is acknowledged as necessary; the difficulty is in determining at what point it ceases to be disciplining and beneficial, and at what point it becomes destructive. Much as in Gregory's essay "What was their Utopia?" the crux is identifying and attaining the "intensity of thought" and "reasoning" needed to discipline strong feeling into coherent and ordered principles. The final stanza of the poem embodies this crux in its image of the mother naming her child when sleep has finally come to "limbs that had run wild." In its "wild" running energy, the child is reduced to the anonymity and formlessness of mere "limbs" and can only be assigned selfhood when it comes to rest. The image deftly implies that the Rising's leaders, too—Lady Gregory had initially termed them "enthusiasts"—may have been insufficiently artful or self-conscious to have pressured their thoughts beyond youthful wildness into order and unity.<sup>46</sup> But the image also notably evokes the "wild" but sublime power in Gonne that both inspired and troubled Yeats, and the "excess of love" for her he feared in himself. As has long been recognized, his figure of the mother "naming" her child is resonant with the primal, Adamic power of language. The poem overall aspires to recover the possibility of clarity and power for words in a world in which they have become merely "polite" or "meaningless," and to achieve a form of naming—"I write it out in a verse"—which might generate some

degree of order for feelings that are fundamentally conflicted in the face of "terrible beauty."

During his weeks in Brittany with Gonne, Yeats quite self-consciously explored the powerful opposing claims Gonne and Gregory had long exerted on him, when writing a memoir covering the 1890s. It is a text which oscillates sharply between sections recalling his turbulent meetings with Gonne during the period of their "spiritual marriage" and recollections of the first summers at Coole when he came to rely on Gregory's counsel and patronage.<sup>47</sup> That process of autobiographical exploration, along with Gonne's refusal of his last proposal to her on or around 13 July 1916, must have progressively helped clarify the tense choices at stake both in "Easter, 1916" and in his private life.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, his absorption in his "personal crisis" was sufficiently pronounced that Gregory actively chided him to creative purpose towards the end of his stay in Brittany. Having apparently registered his failure to mention any new poetry, and his increasingly scant references to Easter Week, she on 20 August declared herself "a little puzzled by your apparent indifference to Ireland after your excitement after the rising" and urged that "there must be some spiritual building possible just as after Parnell's fall, but perhaps more intense."<sup>49</sup> Exactly when he completed an initial full draft of "Easter, 1916" is unclear given the absence of early manuscripts, but by Maud Gonne's account he read a first version of the poem to her near the end of his stay at Colleville. She took it to be, in part, a form of last emotional appeal to her: "he had worked on it the night before, and he implored me to forget the stone and its inner fire for the flashing, changing joy of life."<sup>50</sup> As she also recognized, when subsequently reading the poem, it explicitly rejected her intense conviction of the value of the Rising's leaders' "sacrifice," and its content was enough to make immediately clear to her where his priorities lay (*G-YL* 384–5). He informed Gregory on his return to London merely that "Maud Gonne quarrelled with me rather seriously because I was too pro-English"<sup>51</sup>; but the disagreement surely also reflected the more complex reality of Yeats's speedy transference of his desire from her to Iseult, and what was effectively his final refusal to bind himself to her.

With the failure and perhaps folly of his proposals weighing on his mind, the 51-year-old bachelor arrived at Coole Park to stay with Lady Gregory on 16 September 1916. It was, as he had guiltily observed from Normandy, "the first time for nearly twenty years" he had not been at Coole "at the end of August,"<sup>52</sup> and he came, it seems, with a renewed sense of commitment to the political and personal viewpoints he most admired in her, and which had—just—held sway for in him in Normandy. It was an allegiance Gonne had already long resented, and she settled the score, after Gregory's death, with a cutting dismissal of her rival—depicting Gregory as "queer little old lady, rather like Queen Victoria,"



crudely possessive in her patronage of Yeats, and unambiguously deleterious in her influence on his politics.<sup>53</sup>

Nine days after arriving at Coole, Yeats marked “Easter, 1916” as finished when placing “25 September 1916” under its closing line. Critics have justly asserted that the date calls a reader’s attention to the time lapse between the Rising itself and the poem’s moment of completion, thereby heightening our sense of the political and personal ambivalences the poem takes as part of its theme.<sup>54</sup> But the specific date also quietly acknowledges that for Yeats this completion came while he was at Coole, with Gregory, and not while with Gonne, or in London, or elsewhere. The account offered here of Gregory’s influence on the poem and of Yeats’s negotiation of his conflicted respective loyalties to Gregory and Gonne, suggests why “Easter, 1916” indeed couldn’t be officially “finished” in his view until he had shown it to Lady Gregory, discussed it with her, and until she had in some sense sanctioned it. The fair copy she made, to which she added the notation “Copy before printing—A. Gregory” and then, tellingly, placed and kept in the second volume of her ballad books, marks her sense of participation, as well as her pride, in that final stage of the poem’s emergence.<sup>55</sup>

## VII

After 25 September 1916 Yeats made only relatively minor textual revisions to “Easter, 1916.” He sanctioned a private printing of twenty-five copies of the poem in 1917, sending these to select friends, but he withheld it from his Cuala volume *The Wild Swans at Coole* later that year, and did not allow its open circulation until November 1920. This delay was nominally so as not to damage Lady Gregory’s campaign to win the return of the Lane pictures from the London National Gallery, but also surely reflected his uncertainty as to the long-term political consequences of the Rising. The contexts of the poem’s codification as “finished” on 25 September, however, require significant further consideration.

Seven days after that date, Yeats wrote to William Bailey—Estates Commissioner for the Irish Land Commission, and a legal advisor to and shareholder of the Abbey Theatre—inquiring whether the Congested Districts Board would allow him to purchase “Ballylee Castle,” a property he had “coveted” for “years.”<sup>56</sup> And in this same week he also began composing “The Wild Swans at Coole.” The earliest printed version of that poem is dated “October 1916” and its present-tense descriptions of the dry autumnal paths, low lake-water and “October twilight” confirm that the first surviving manuscripts drafts were written at Coole prior to his departure for London on 7 or 8 October.<sup>57</sup>

This conjunction of events, and their relation to the completion of "Easter 1916" has surprisingly been overlooked. As has long been recognized, Yeats's purchase of Ballylee—the first property he had ever owned—was in part an affirmation of his long partnership with Gregory, rooting him as her near neighbor in the Galway landscape where they had begun collecting folklore together nearly two decades earlier. Critics have also often observed, too, that the purchase was effectively a declaration of recommitment to Ireland in the wake of the Rising. But Yeats's acquisition of Ballylee was also, as Lady Gregory herself quickly intuited, in part a declaration of independence—he would subsequently reside there during his summers, rather than with her at Coole—and in part a gesture of appropriation, since the property had until recently been part of the Gregory estate.<sup>58</sup> Although she actively facilitated his acquisition of Ballylee, wrote with some ceremony to send him "signs & markers of your possession" when the purchase was legally finalized, oversaw renovation work, and acted as *de facto* agent and caretaker for him over many years, even her earliest responses to the purchase register elements of unease and disapproval on her part.<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, she manifestly wanted to implicate herself more closely, both practically and creatively, with his ownership of the property; but at the same time she intuited that Yeats, hitherto "her" court poet, was now in some sense intent on slipping the leash.

If Yeats had returned to Coole conscious that his alignment and friendship with Gregory had held sway, and then taken clear primacy, during his turbulent visit to Colleville—and had thus waited to codify "Easter, 1916" as completed under her roof—"The Wild Swans at Coole" suggests that he arrived also with a heightened awareness of the limitations, and indeed constraint, inherent in his relationship with Gregory. The poem is a self-elegy, which acknowledges the beauty and security of Coole, but which also implies that to stay there would be a passive falling back into long-standing habits. The autumnal leaves, dry paths and "October twilight" he encounters there intensify his consciousness of age, while the swans he observes on Coole lake have a "wild" power and mobility he, by implication, now lacks, and craves. Envious of their possibility of building and breeding elsewhere—an early draft imagines their "eggs" amongst the "rushes"<sup>60</sup>—he is the more alert to both his own failure to "build" and his own comparative inaction: the word "still" appears four times in the poem's thirty lines, with overlapping primary resonances of stasis and temporal continuation. Rather than finding "peace" and comfort as he had so often done at Coole, his return is now, by implication, a source of indictment as he reflects on the consequences of his failure to make a decisive move emotionally with either *Gonne* or her daughter.

The poem thus indirectly expresses the intent and desire that motivated his letter to Bailey on 2 October—for independent ownership of a place where

he could and would plan decisive changes in his life. It is consequently a veiled elegy for Coole itself, which can no longer be a fully satisfactory home, as well as for his earlier self. The first reference Yeats makes to himself in the poem is a passive construction—"The nineteenth autumn has come upon me"—a phrasing which deftly conveys his consciousness of loss of agency and wasted time, and sets the tone for the poem's plangent, but indirect, meditation on his own feelings of "drift" and the need to "awake." While writing his memoir of the 1890s in France, Yeats had told John Quinn he hoped the work would "lay many ghosts" or would "purify my own imagination by setting the past in order."<sup>61</sup> If he left Normandy having permanently ended his long-held hopes of union with Gonne, the return to Coole, too, involved a deliberate recognition that his long-standing partnership with Gregory also needed to change. His purchase of Ballylee was merely the first manifestation of this resolution; and in the following months, as Roy Foster has observed, his relationship to Coole and Gregory indeed "changed dramatically"—culminating in his marriage to George Hyde-Lees the following September (*Life* 2 121). Yeats would declare in "To be Carved on a Stone at Ballylee" in 1921 that he had "Restored this tower for my wife George" (*VP* 406)—and that declaration, duly carved on a plaque, is now part of the fabric of the tower itself. But his purchase categorically predated his thought of marrying her. Having been rejected by both Maud and Iseult Gonne, and in turn resolved to permanently end what he had already recognized was at root always a "barren passion" (*VP* 270), he had retreated to Coole to a heightened awareness that Gregory and Coole, too, could no longer be the centre they previously had been: his peace must now be self-made, and not dependent either on the uncertain course of Irish politics or on the powerful women who had respectively refused him and enabled him.

That "The Wild Swans at Coole" echoes "Easter, 1916" has been often noted. Its acknowledgement that "All's changed" and its evocation of stones amongst the "brimming water" of Coole lake, in particular, offer powerful resonances with the "All changed, changed utterly" and the iconography of "stone" and "living stream" in the earlier poem. But the extent to which the two poems emerged in intimate and dialogic relation has been obscured by their distant placements in Yeats's canon. It is perhaps the "wild" in the title of the later poem that is most arresting in this respect. While at Colleville, Yeats had termed the events of Easter week a "wild business" and a "wild rising,"<sup>62</sup> and this word, with its resonances of disorder, uncontrolled energy, lack of constraint, and even lack of self-consciousness or reason, is crucially present in the image of the "limbs run wild" in "Easter, 1916." But whereas it is a term redolent with danger there, in the later poem "wild" is used more approvingly, and with some yearning. The swans on Coole Lake are figures for a form of passion and possibility of transcendence that avoids the inhuman fixity ascribed to the stone

in “Easter, 1916.” Alive and mobile, they nonetheless achieve or constitute aesthetic shape, and so seem to partake both of the living and the eternal. They can be precisely numbered and observed, but remain “Mysterious” and defy reduction either into complete orderliness or complete aestheticization as they “scatter wheeling in great broken rings” (VP 322–23). The poem, in effect, seeks a reconciliation of the forces that had remained in such acute and unresolved tension in “Easter, 1916”—a productive union between order, stillness and “peace” and the contrary but necessary and redeeming forces of wildness and passion. If the earlier poem embodies a conflicted rejection both of Gonne’s Republican politics and his continuing personal commitment to her, with his allegiance to Gregory taking sway, the later poem considers what needs to be reclaimed from that choice, and, in its turn, begins to negotiate the very considerable limitations in his relationship with Gregory.

“Easter, 1916” as published reveals relatively little of these private tensions so crucial to its evolution. That is surely appropriate, since the poem is fundamentally about how a personal way of seeing and feeling on Yeats’s part, and a mode of political understanding, have both been “changed utterly” by the transforming consequences of the Rising. As so often in Yeats’s finest work, his celebrated proposition that “we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric” but “of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” holds true here; and that proposition, notably, was one he crafted very soon after the poem’s completion, or just possibly during its last stages of drafting.<sup>63</sup> The poem’s nuanced uncertainties negotiate—amongst many other things—the sharp contrast between Gonne’s praise for the “beauty” of the Rising’s leaders’ deaths, and Gregory’s sense of their “terrible vanity” and visionary power; but that contrast and conjunction remains a buried history, changed in its turn by Yeats into a verse more enduring.

## Notes

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1. See Nicholas Grene, *Yeats’s Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9–16. Grene notes that two earlier Yeats poems had specific dates accorded to them in first newspaper printings, though they were not so dated in subsequent volume printings. Of “The Gift,” dated “January 8th. 1913” when first published in *The Irish Times*, he observes that “it is clear this is not a date of composition” but rather “a means of foregrounding the poem’s topicality and function as part of the propaganda campaign for the [proposed Hugh Lane] Gallery [in Dublin].” Of “The Ballad of Earl Paul,” dated “Sligo, April 4th” for its appearance in the *Irish Weekly Independent* in 1893, he notes that the “topography as much as the [date]

may have been the most important feature here: the poet is signing in from his West of Ireland home." The format of the date at the foot of "Easter, 1916" varies somewhat between canonical printings, being "Sept. 25, 1916." in the Shorter edition, for instance. I follow the format of the first Cuala Press printing here.

2. Yeats to Gregory (hereafter AG), 11 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2950; Yeats to Quinn, 23 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2960. The only poem Yeats directly reports writing during this period was "In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen," a draft of which he sent to his sister Lily on 24 August, *CL InteLex* #3026. He told Quinn in a letter of 1 August 1916 "I write lyrics from time to time" but without identifying his subject-matter; *CL InteLex* #3012.
3. *Michael Robartes and the Dancer: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 68–75.
4. Emory. The opening and closing sections of the essay were published by Ann Saddlemeyer in her essay "Augusta Gregory, Irish Nationalist" in *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*, ed. Joseph Ronsley (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977), 29–40.
5. WBY to Rossi, 6 June 1932, *CL InteLex* #5684.
6. WBY to AG, 21 June 1916, *CL InteLex* #2987.
7. For "wild," see, for instance, "He Wishes his Beloved were Dead" (*VP* 176). Yeats notably described his first meeting with Gonne as the moment when "troubling of my life began" (*Mem* 40).
8. See, for instance, *Diaries* 151.
9. See WBY to AG, 25 May 1916, in which he probably refers specifically to her letter to him of 27 April. WBY sent this on to Robert Gregory, and then asked repeatedly for its return (*CL InteLex* #2964 and #2953, 2954).
10. WBY to AG, 27 April 1916, *CL InteLex* #2934.
11. Yeats to Schepeler, 27 April; to Susan Yeats, 2 May; to Ruth Shine, 1 May; to Elizabeth Corbet Yeats, 30 April. *CL InteLex* #2933, #2938, #2937, #2935.
12. Berg. Gregory also referred in her chapter "The Rising" in *Seventy Years* to the "village tyrants" and "armed bullies who have been terrorizing the district for the last couple of years"; see *Seventy Years: being the autobiography of Lady Gregory*, ed. Colin Smythe (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1974), 546. And to John Quinn she wrote, more sympathetically, on 27 April 1916: "I'm afraid a great many foolish young lads have been drawn in, believing they were doing something for the country" (Berg).
13. Berg.
14. Berg.
15. Berg.
16. AG to Blunt, 21 May 1916 (Berg).
17. *Ibid.*
18. WBY to AG, 11 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2950.
19. WBY to John Quinn, 23 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2960.
20. Berg.
21. Berg.
22. Berg.
23. *Shelley's Prose* ed. David Lee Clark (New Amsterdam Books, New York: 1988), 154.
24. Berg.
25. MacNeill, who had countermanded the order for the Rising and did not participate, was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment but released in 1917.
26. Yeats likely received the essay on 30 or 31 May 1916, but his next surviving letter to her, written on 1 June, makes no mention of it, possibly since he was preparing to leave for Dublin the following evening and would hence see her in person soon (*CL InteLex* #2974).

- Gregory subsequently sent the essay to Wilfrid Blunt on 14 June, remarking that “I sent it to The Nation but they wouldn’t print it” (Berg).
27. Perhaps recalling Gregory’s essay, he would dismiss Eva Gore-Booth’s politics as a “vague Utopia” in his 1927 elegy “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz” (VP 475).
  28. See, especially, Borstein, *Yeats and Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
  29. This presentation copy from Pearse is now in the Berg Collection.
  30. Blunt, diary for 25 November 1916, Fitzwilliam Museum, cited by Elizabeth Longford in “Lady Gregory and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt”; see *Lady Gregory: Fifty Years After* ed. Ann Sadlemyer and Colin Smythe (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), 95.
  31. See, for instance, Pethica, *ibid.*, 98–100.
  32. Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 547.
  33. *Cornhill Magazine* (May 1900), 622–34.
  34. The two albums are now at Princeton. As his letter of 15 April 1915 confirms, Yeats had contributed to Gregory’s collection: “I send you a great bundle of Old Irish ballads under another cover. I bought them for your collection when you [were] in America & forgot to bring them to Dublin” (CL *InteLex* #2630).
  35. The later of the two ballad volumes includes a copy of verses “found on P.J. Pigot [sic] Georges St Gort on 4–5–16” (Princeton). Patrick Piggott was Adjutant of the Gort Battalion of the IRA from 1916 to 1920.
  36. Gregory, *The Kiltartan Poetry Book* (New York and London: Putnam, 1919), 6.
  37. P. H. Pearse, *Poems* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1918), 333. Gonne translated one of the poems Yeats had sent her—“The Wayfarer”—into French, and this was published in *La Mercure de France* as “Le Voyageur” in July 1916.
  38. Berg.
  39. Berg.
  40. WBY to AG, 3 July 1916, CL *InteLex* #2996.
  41. AG to WBY, 8 July 1916, Berg.
  42. WBY to AG, 14 August 1916, CL *InteLex* #3017.
  43. *Letters to W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound from Iseult Gonne: a girl that knew all Dante once*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares, Anna MacBride White and Christina Bridgewater (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), 65.
  44. G-YL 375, and see also 372–3, 384.
  45. WBY to AG, 3 July 1916, CL *InteLex* #2996.
  46. Lily Yeats had termed the Rising “childish madness” and its leaders “clever children” in a letter to John Quinn on 22 May 1916 (*Life* 2 45).
  47. See, especially, *Mem* 101–134. Writing to Gregory on 19 August 1916, Yeats summarized the memoir as recalling “a general impression of turbulence” (CL *InteLex* #3022).
  48. In a letter of 20 August 1916 to WBY, AG shrewdly noted that his revisiting of the ‘98 celebrations might “be all a help” in his thinking about the effects of the Rising (Berg).
  49. AG to WBY, 20 August 1916, Berg. In his essay “After I am hanged my portrait will be interesting,” Colm Tóibín nicely implies that the this was something of a whipping-in letter on her part; *London Review of Books*, 31 March 2016, 11–23.
  50. Maud Gonne, “An Account of Yeats,” cited by Foster in *Life* 2 62. The recollection dates from 1939, and Gonne misremembers the reading as occurring in September 1916, though Yeats left Colleville near the end of August.
  51. WBY to AG, 10 September 1916, CL *InteLex* #3033.
  52. WBY to AG, 19 August 1916, CL *InteLex* #3022.
  53. Maud Gonne MacBride, *A Servant of the Queen* (London: Gollancz, 1974), 332–33.
  54. See Wayne Chapman, “Yeats’s Dislocated Rebellion Poems and the Great War: The Case of *The Wild Swans at Coole* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*” (YA 16), especially pp. 78–9

where Chapman summarizes key critical responses to the delay in publication of "Easter, 1916" as marking a "combination of uncertainty, indifference, wishfulness, and cunning" on Yeats's part.

55. This manuscript was in the possession of one of Lady Gregory's grandchildren when I first saw it in 1997. It was tucked into the rear of the second of Gregory's ballad books, and had been overlooked on the assumption that it was merely a copy she had made from the 1917 Clement Shorter printing of the poem prior to its inclusion in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921. However, it follows the working draft Yeats dated "Sept. 25 1916," and clearly predates both the fair manuscript copy Yeats sent Shorter on 28 March 1917 (*CL InteLex* #3024) and the first surviving typescript identified in George Yeats's hand as the "First-typed copy with W. B. Yeats's corrections in his own hand." It bears one emendation in Yeats's hand to line 71 ("and died" becomes "are dead"). This parallels the change Yeats made on the fair copy he sent to Shorter. If this emendation was made at Coole, it would have been entered prior to Yeats's departure on 6 October 1916, since he was not thereafter at Coole with Gregory until his return in April 1917 (although he was briefly there as Margaret Gregory's guest that November while negotiating the purchase of Ballylee). Gregory's notation on the manuscript makes it more likely that she made the fair copy in London, possibly on or near 7 December, when Yeats recited the poem aloud to her and Lady Margaret Sackville. All known drafts of the poem other than this "Gregory" manuscript are detailed in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer: Manuscript Materials* ed. Thomas Parkinson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and see also *CL InteLex*.
56. Yeats to William F. Bailey, 2 October 1916, *CL InteLex* #3043.
57. *The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).
58. See Pethica, "Yeats's 'perfect man,'" *Dublin Review* 35 (Summer 2009), 37–39 and *passim*.
59. Gregory to Yeats, 13 June 1917, Berg; in a letter of 11 August 1917 to John Quinn she concurred with him that Yeats "little knows what he is in for" with the property, and she unleashed a salvo of criticisms regarding the purchase: "I never encouraged him to buy it, and would have actually opposed it but that it seemed ungracious, being in our neighbourhood. He has a roofless castle and a dilapidated cottage" (NYPL).
60. *The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 11.
61. Yeats to Quinn, 1 August 1916, *CL InteLex* #3012.
62. Yeats to Edward Gordon Craig, 1 August 1916; to Florence Farr, 19 August 1916, *CL InteLex* #3013 and #3021.
63. CW5 8. The "Anima Hominis" section of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* is dated 25 February 1917, but Yeats may have begun preliminary work on the volume while still at Colleville the previous summer (see letter to Florence Farr, 19 August 1916, *CL InteLex* #3021); regardless, as Foster notes (*Life* 279) the "influence of Colleville" is manifest in the completed text, not least in its religious language, and in Yeats's concern with sanctity and morality in the original wording of the aphorism.



## WHAT WAS THEIR UTOPIA?

*Lady Augusta Gregory*

For many days the road that leads north, to Galway, was barricaded and held by armed men; the railroad that leads to Dublin had been torn up, the telegraph poles had been cut and the wires flung over walls. For news we were dependent on rumour, vague, alarming, for the most part false. When newspapers came again they told that the rising had been put down, and the chief among the leaders shot.

Since then the papers have been as full of rumours as had been our roads; rumours of plans “for the better governance of Ireland”. Perhaps these are known in London today, for the Prime Minister was to speak yesterday. But that news has not reached us yet; we only know he has been asking counsel, opinion, from men on one or the other side. That is a wise thing to do; and is it not a great pity it is too late to hear from their own lips what was the plan of government made for Ireland by those leaders who are dead?<sup>1</sup> One would so gladly hear it; for these men who proclaimed their promise to all the citizens of Ireland of “religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities”; who promised “to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation equally”, must certainly have shaped some scheme in detail by which to work out these general principles. One desires to know by what means, by what reasoning they had meant to bring Ulster and Connacht into friendship; how so to enforce law as to bring the serenity of order into a long disordered land; how so to use their “Science and Poetry and Thought” to

“make the lot  
“Of the dwellers in a cot  
“Such they curse their neighbour not”

For as Shelley says: “In men who suffer for political crimes there is a large mixture of enterprise and fortitude and disinterestedness, and the elements, though misguided and disarranged by which the strength and happiness of a nation might have been cemented”. And these men, Irish and living in Ireland, living in this vision, this idea, must certainly have given to it an intensity of thought to which politicians can hardly attain. One covets to know the ground plan of their Republic, their Jerusalem, their Utopia; of how they would have attained to Milton’s aim that must be the aim of every Free Commonwealth to

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1. Text deleted: Might not this evidence yet be taken from told by one of the companionship who is not yet upon the threshold of punishment, John O’Neill?

“make the people fittest to choose, and the chosen fittest to govern”; and all the more if we admit for them Whitman’s proud claim for their “visions the visions of poets, the most solid announcements of any”. We covet to know once again in this generation what was the poet[']s Utopia. For these men were certainly poets. MacDonagh’s verses are the best known:

“Oh for the storms again, and youth in my heart again  
My spirit to glory strained, wild in this wild wood then  
That now shall ne[']r strain; though I think if the tempest should roll  
I could rise and strive with death, and smite him back from my soul”.

There is rhythm in his play *When the Dawn is Come*, put on by us at the Abbey Theatre. It has for its subject the close of a revolt, and one of the leaders, Thurlough, said in the stage direction to be “under thirty years” brings the terms offered by the enemy: “Full freedom in our land with our laws and governance, under the foreign crown, with a joint council of their state and ours”. An old man, Hugh, says “It is all we ask”. Thurlough goes on “But there is more. We may not war on any; they guard our trade; we may not tax their goods. (throwing papers on table) Here are the terms, almost the same as our fathers won, nearly two hundred years ago—and lost by fraud.”

“HUGH: In God’s name let us take them lest we get no others.

“THURLOUGH: It is not well to claim the name of God for one side or the other. They offered terms before we armed; if we had taken them in any name we had not got these”.

The old man still pleads, begs him not to speak against our peace. “You are young. I who am old remember the hard times when men dared not to look for this. I then was young and fought for this”.

But Thurlough answers: “Father, the father of our army and this land, and my dear friend, you do remember well. But memory at best is a troubled thing. You were young once and fought for this. In those days too, were old men who had fought for less. And in their young days still others old who had fought—why, for less still. So back to the day when the tide was full before, and old men and young men fought for all—as we shall fight—for all. The old men of your young fighting days said of you: “He is young; he will be yet like us. If he had known the bad days of our youth he would take less”; and you are old and I am young. I may grow old—who knows?—and may see young men fighting for more than now I claim”.

MacDonough [sic] died young, and one thinks of other words of the play. “To save my life? To lengthen on this part of life I know? What if our lives are here but just begun—’tis your creed Father—here but begun, elsewhere accomplished—if what seems broken here be but part-hidden by the cloud of

death—. Half builded here and curst, perchance full moulded in the eternal night! Life, but a fragment here, beyond shall be achieved...” And again: “Men, passing, see not in the light of their own day the truth of their own day. So is still revered the martyr-blood that once was traitor blood”.

I have here a little book [of] verse by P. H. Pearse.<sup>2</sup> It was given by Pearse to Mr. Yeats, and being in Irish, by him to me. I do not find in it anything of war or revolt or politics; the sadness of parting comes into it, and the darkness of “the earth-grey house”. Last night I put English on one of the poems, a mountain woman’s lullaby to her child, the ‘little candle of her house’, and read it to the little ones upstairs going to bed, and they were pleased with it and listened as it went on:

“O little mouth that sucks at my breast  
It is Mary herself will kiss you on your road.

“O little wise face as soft as silk  
It is Christ will lay his fair hand upon you.

“The kiss of Mary on the mouth of my babe;  
The hand of Christ on my little babe’s head.

“Be silent house; and you little grey mice  
Stay quiet tonight within in your holes.

“Moths on the window shut up your wings;  
Quiet O flies your humming and buzzing!

“Plover and curlew travelling past my house  
Do not cry out going over the mountain!

“O tribes of the mountain that wakened so early  
Do not stir this night till the shining of the sun!”

Many of the verses are concerned with children:

“I never gathered gold;  
The praise I got faded;  
In love I found trouble  
That withered my life.

“Riches or fame  
I will not find at the last,  
(What I have O God is enough!)  
But my name in the heart of a child”.

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2. Text revised from “a little book of Pearse’s Irish poems.”

But there is one rather stern little poem on Ireland:

"I am Eire:  
Older I than the Hag of Beara.

"Great my boast:  
I gave birth to brave Cuchulain.

"Great my shame:  
My own children sold their mother.

"I am Eire:  
Lonelier than the Hag Beara".

John MacNeill, yet on the threshold of freedom or punishment, has through many unselfish years served Irish scholarship well, helping the learned with his learning and making known to the unlearned in translation the noble "Lays of Finn":

"Listen to the prophesy of Finn. A vision of shapes has appeared to me, has reft me of my strength and my reason.

"It is not this that grieves me, but the number of the grey-faced foreigners here, and that I and the Fianna will not be living, and I myself driving them out.

"The foreigners garden will be here, and many a tree a-planting; and herbs a-putting down and coming up from their roots.

The Irish will rise hardily, alike in east and north and south; it grieves me that it may not be myself who will come when the shout of the men will be raised".

Finn lived before history was written, and his mother was a daughter of the gods; yet the lament of one of his people left after him must be in some hearts today:

"Henceforth I can but sorrow since the sons of Treanmor are gone; my glory and beauty have departed; my strength, my hosts, my household".

Now that Germany, thank God, can never gain a foothold here, I would humbly pray that John MacNeill be asked, as representing those leaders who are gone, to give full testimony as to the plan, the project, in which they had put their faith. It may be it would give some common meeting ground for all, as well the patient as the passionate, who wish our country well. And there would

be a compelling force behind it; for is it not the custom in Ireland as in tragedy for the victory to remain with the dead?

A. Gregory  
Coole Park, Co. Galway  
May 16.

## DATING "EASTER, 1916"

Matthew Campbell

"Easter, 1916" is a poem about a date and a poem around which many other dates have clustered. The first is manifest most obviously in its title—in either of its iterations through its publishing history—"Easter, 1916," as it was called by Yeats in manuscript and printed versions between 1917 and his death in 1939, or "Easter 1916" as it subsequently became known in Macmillan editions from 1949 to 1984. These are treacherous bibliographical waters, but just to say briefly here, given that the author was dead ten years before the two volume *Poems of W. B. Yeats* (the so-called "Definitive Edition") was published by Macmillan in 1949, from which the comma was deleted, most recent editors have quietly returned it.<sup>1</sup> The revision may have implemented the Macmillan house style, but whether it be Yeats's or not, it lost the fine sense of the specific in the general which is offered by the pause after "Easter," a date which is both connected with a single year, 1916, but also a moveable feast sounded across Christian time and intended to be remembered in the posterity of poem and event. There is another date and poem in play, as recorded in the title of the poem "September 1913." After its first publication in the *Irish Times*, on 8 September 1913—called "Romance in Ireland"—the retitled "September, 1913" was then published twice with a comma, the last time by the Cuala Press in 1914, before the comma was removed by Macmillan in 1916 (VP 289). Punctuation history aside, as Nicholas Grene says, "Easter, 1916" "talked back to 'September 1913' [...]. With Yeats's passion for historical periodization and his meticulous concern for the detailed presentation of his texts, we cannot assume that any dates within his canon are merely adventitious matter of record."<sup>2</sup>

Other dates are both directly and implicitly written into the texts of "Easter, 1916." One is "*September 25, 1916*," the appended date of its composition or completion which still remains (now and again in italics, with a comma usually in place, and sometimes a full stop<sup>3</sup>) in most printings. And the secret or symbolist date, as it were, is told in the numbers of the lines of its great stanzas: four of them, two of sixteen and two of twenty-four lines, telling the date of the first day of the Easter Rising against British rule in Dublin on the twenty-fourth day of the fourth month of the sixteenth year of the twentieth century: that is, 24 April 1916. Helen Vendler has ascribed "an element of Yeatsian magic" to this "unusual form of extreme numerological control," a way in which the formal properties of the poem seek out the historical forming of human time by

dating: "if technique were to make something happen on the page, it had to be intimately linked, by some means, to the originating cause."<sup>4</sup>

Other critics of Yeats have frequently invoked other dates associated with the poem's textual history, in particular the poem's first public printing—as "Easter, 1916," along with other poems of the Rising and its aftermath—in *The New Statesman*, published in London on October 23 1920. The broadest significance of this date of publication was first drawn by Conor Cruise O'Brien in his celebrated (some might say notorious) 1965 essay, "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats": "To publish these poems in the context [the war of Independence, 1920] was a political act, and a bold one: probably the boldest of Yeats's career."<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, the most precise etching of the date into event has been offered by Tom Paulin, in an essay called "Yeats's Hunger-Strike Poem" where he reads the *New Statesman* publication as a deliberate act, calculated to influence public opinion at the time of the hunger strike of Terence McSwiney. McSwiney died two days later on 25 October 1920. Paulin argues that, "What seems clear is that Yeats's poem cannot be isolated from the public events of the summer and autumn of 1920 and that we need to consider the poem in relation to those events *and* to its first audience. Poems, like plays, are inspired by and for audiences."<sup>6</sup> So, in this account "Easter, 1916" becomes "October, 1920," a poem published to influence public opinion and state policy.

Further dates are in play. One is the date of publication of an undated pamphlet which has as its title on the cover, *Easter, 1916 by W. B. Yeats*. Inside the back cover it reads (in italic font), "*Of this poem twenty-five copies only have been privately printed by Clement Shorter for distribution among his friends.*" The editor, publisher and friend of Yeats, and a man of left-leaning instincts, Shorter cultivated his friendships among authors (and his powers over them as publisher) to enable a lucrative trade in private editions. In the statement on this pamphlet "his friends" here refers to Shorter's friends since he, not Yeats, has signed these pamphlets.

A number of bibliographers and critics (and indeed some catalogues of the collections lucky enough to possess this exceedingly rare publication) place its publication in 1916. Paulin, for instance, thought it was printed in Autumn 1916, just after Yeats wrote it, and for Paulin, it thus amounts to a "dissident, underground or samizdat text."<sup>7</sup> However, the pamphlet didn't see print until Easter of 1917. Far from risking imprisonment for his dissident writing, Yeats was worried that if Shorter published the poem at the wrong time, he might ruin one of the early episodes in what has become a century-long quest in Irish curatorial history, the return of Hugh Lane's collection of modern art to Dublin. Pursuing the Irish claim for the paintings, Yeats and Augusta Gregory got as far as lunch at 10 Downing Street with the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith on 1 December 1916, though the occasion was apparently soured by Yeats's



mention of the rising and Asquith's tart response.<sup>8</sup> (It was not a particularly opportune time for politicking: Asquith was to be ousted by Lloyd George, six days later.) On 28 March 1917, Yeats wrote to Shorter, "Please be very careful with the Rebellion poem. Lady Gregory asked me not to send it you until we had finished our dispute with the authorities about the Lane pictures. She was afraid of it getting about & damaging us & she is not timid."<sup>9</sup> If the last line of this letter is oft-quoted about the mooted radicalism of Gregory and Yeats after Easter week, the context—the Lane pictures controversy—is at quite a remove from the other, rather larger, historical event. Shorter subsequently printed the poem and copies ended up "getting about," if slowly. For example, on 17 March 1919, fully nineteen months before *The New Statesman*, a short-lived publication called the *Irish Commonwealth* published sixteen lines of "Easter, 1916." The pamphlet published at Easter 1917 was the source.

*Easter, 1916* was only one of a number of Shorter's limited edition private printings about the events of April to August 1916. They addressed not just Easter week, but the subsequent executions, the trial and hanging of Roger Casement, and even events in France—the Somme offensive, in which many thousands of Irish died, began on 2 July. Neither Shorter nor the authors of the texts he printed were "very careful" with these "rebellion poems." It may be that Shorter's wife, the Irish poet Dora Sigerson—or Sigerson-Shorter, to use the name she published under after her marriage—was behind these publications. Inserted into twenty-five copies of Sigerson's December 1916 selected poems, *Love of Ireland* was a pamphlet, privately printed in Edinburgh, containing five *Poems of the Irish Rebellion 1916*.<sup>10</sup> This pamphlet contains a poem titled "Sixteen Dead Men," published a year before Yeats wrote his poem of the same name.<sup>11</sup> Sigerson died in January 1918, and the poems were published in the posthumous collections, *The Sad Years* in Britain and *Sixteen Dead Men* in the United States. Yeats may not have read Sigerson's "Sixteen Dead Men" before he wrote his, since it was only on May 17 1918 that he wrote to Shorter stating his realisation that on reading Sigerson's "Rebellion poems," he would have to postpone a lecture he intended to give on "recent poetry and war poetry."<sup>12</sup> Having asked Shorter for permission to quote from unpublished work, reading it he found, "Your wives [*sic*] poems would have been my chief effect; & times are too dangerous for me to encourage men to [take] risks I am not prepared to share or approve."<sup>13</sup>

A month after the publication of Sigerson's pamphlet, in January 1917, Shorter also printed in London twenty-five copies of George Russell's pamphlet, *Salutation: A Poem on the Rebellion of 1916*.<sup>14</sup> It contained five stanzas of a poem which adopted various forms in its subsequent publishing history. Like "Easter, 1916," it names names, including in its first iteration three which also appeared in Yeats's poem: Padraig Pearse, Thomas McDonagh and James

Connolly. Constance Markievicz, who is described but not mentioned by name in Yeats's poem, also originally got a stanza to herself. Russell's is also not much of an underground text, being published in full in the *Irish Times* the following 19 December 1917 at the end of a letter to the editor called "The New Nation." The poem was now titled, "To the Memory of Some I knew who are Dead and who loved Ireland," and lengthened to seven stanzas, its remembrance was eventually split equally between those who died at the front and those who died during and after the Rising. Given that she was still living, the Markievicz stanza was removed and three of the nationalist war dead (Alan Anderson, Willie Redmond, Thomas Kettle) joined the three who were executed after Easter week 1916.<sup>15</sup> The article and poem are on page 6 of that day's paper, occupying the column next to that week's "Roll of Honour." Russell's poem mentions six dead; the Roll of Honour lists seventy-three allied dead, one hundred and ten wounded and thirty-six missing in action.<sup>16</sup>

In the midst of these private—and then not-so-private—printings, I would like to introduce another date. That is "9 JN 1917" (June 9, 1917), the accession date recorded on the British Library's copy (No.17) of Shorter's *Easter, 1916* by W. B. Yeats. The Library has no record of any interdiction being placed on this publication, and it does not seem to have been deposited to secure copyright: it has a yellow British museum stamp, meaning it was a donation. There is also no record of who donated it, but it is likely it was Shorter himself.<sup>17</sup> The British Library copy suggests that the full text of Yeats's poem was in the public domain—or at least was available to readers in the British Museum—three and a half years earlier than is usually thought.

Far from being a samizdat text, "Easter, 1916" was sitting in the British Museum all through the war years and the early years of the Irish war of independence. It was hidden in plain sight, if indeed it was hidden at all. Whether or not Yeats's poem was actually read in the Museum reading room before 1920, the library has no record. But the least we can say about it is that Yeats's poem is one of a number of publications printed in the aftermath of a significant historical date, a date which is remembered in its title. Initially at least, it was a poem printed to be read by a group of like-minded readers, the friends of Clement Shorter. Very shortly afterwards, it was available to be read by all who used the British Museum. Shorter's friends were others who also wrote about the events which occurred in Dublin, at Easter 1916, and some of their writings, like those of Sigerson and Russell, were printed in series, as it were, with "Easter, 1916." These texts all mentioned the date in their titles on first printing: *Poems of the Irish Rebellion 1916*; [...] *a poem on the Irish Rebellion of 1916*; *Easter, 1916*. And the poems they contained were either circumspect in their admiration of those who led the rising (Yeats, Russell) or strongly critical of British government policy (Sigerson).

Even private printing means that there is circulation. Deposit in the library invites a wide readership. And poems such as these took for theme the role of poetry written with the urgency of contemporaneity for a historical event from which the repercussions were yet to be fully discerned. It is, of course, the rhetorical power and political sophistication of Yeats's poem which has enabled it to influence many subsequent discussions not only about the historical impact of the deaths of the leaders of the Easter Rising, but also as an example of how the elegiac poem might be said to participate in the events which trouble the living stream of history. Whether its publication was used further to trouble that stream remains moot for many in the violent century which followed, especially those who have wondered at the limits of the historical agency of poetry (W. H. Auden's 1939 elegy for Yeats has become a critical cliché in this respect). In subsequent years its author certainly felt increasingly emboldened to state his position and test the ways in which poetry might make things happen. If no dissident, Yeats certainly knew the value of tactical publication, as did those around him, as publishers or fellow writers. The dates which cluster around the printing history of "Easter, 1916" show a merging of the world of the private printings of the British book trade with the address of poems to the limits of their political effectiveness, as a date came into print as historical event.

### Notes

1. Richard Finneran returned the comma to *The Poems*, CW1. A. Norman Jeffares retained the revised title without a comma in *Yeats's Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1989). Macmillan, Palgrave and Scribner (in the U.S.) have been publishing both versions of the title since 1984. It has also been returned in selected and collected editions edited by Finneran (1989), Albright (1990), Larrisssey (1997) and Pethica (2000). Palgrave Macmillan currently uses the *Chicago Manual of Style*, which states: "In the day-month-year system—useful in material that requires many full dates (and standard in British English)—no commas are needed. Where month and year only are given, or a specific day (such as a holiday) with a year, neither system uses a comma."
2. Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7 and chapter one, "Dates," 5–29.
3. See VP 394 and *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose*, ed. James Pethica (New York: Norton, 2000), 75.
4. Helen Vendler, "The Later Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, ed. Marjorie Howes and Helen Vendler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80.
5. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Passion and Cunning and other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), 29.
6. Tom Paulin, "Yeats's Hunger-Strike Poem," in *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber, 1992), 138. The fullest account of the poem's history as revolutionary events unravelled is given by Wayne K. Chapman, "Yeats's Dislocated Rebellion Poems and the Great War: The Case of *The Wild Swans of Coole* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*," *Yeats Annual* 16, ed. Warwick Gould (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2005), 71–97.

7. Paulin, 138.
8. Gregory, journal entry 1 December 1916, quoted in David Pierce, *Yeats's Worlds: Ireland, England and the Poetic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 177.
9. 28 March 1917, *CL InteLex* #3204.
10. Dora Sigerson, *Love of Ireland: Poems and Ballads* (Dublin: Mansell, 1916). *With which is incorporated Poems of the Irish Rebellion 1916* (Edinburgh: Constable & Co, 1916). Twenty-five copies only of the insert were printed.
11. *Life* 2 112.
12. *CL InteLex* #3434 and #3441
13. 17 May 1918, *CL InteLex* #3441.
14. George Russell, *Salutation: a poem on the Irish rebellion of 1916* (London : Privately Printed by Clement Shorter), 1917.
15. For the textual and manuscript history of the poem, see David Leon Higdon, "A New Manuscript of AE's 'Salutation,'" *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 30.2 (1987), 133–139.
16. *Irish Times*, 17 December 1917; AE, "The New Nation," Letters to the Editor, *The Irish Times*, 19 December 1917. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Irish Times* and the *Weekly Irish Times*.
17. Author correspondence with British Library, October 2014.

## “EASTER, 1916” AND TRAUMA

Charles I. Armstrong

Interpreting “Easter, 1916” in light of Trauma Studies may at first appear to be an unpromising enterprise. The latter is an interdisciplinary field, the foundations of which have been embattled and shifting over the last few decades. Although the focus on a psychological “wound” and its aftermath is a common denominator, different inflections of trauma theory have developed, dependent not only upon the disciplinary affiliation of its theorists but also their nationality and choice of historical context. As can be expected from the “peculiarly disrupted, discontinuous history” of trauma,<sup>1</sup> its theoretical foundations have varied, as its conceptualization has based itself upon such different historical episodes as 9/11, the Vietnam War, Auschwitz, World War I, and nineteenth-century railway accidents. The first World War gave us not only Freud’s influential theories on the death drive and repetition compulsion, but also the concept of “shell shock” and memorable literary creations such as Sean O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie* and the suicidal veteran Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Historically, this war is the key episode among those formative for Trauma Studies that took place during Yeats’s mature authorship. Yet Yeats avoided writing directly about the war, famously snubbing, for instance, the war poets in the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. In the introduction to that volume, he bluntly stated that “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry,” and contrasted the war poets’ expression of that suffering with the more suitable literary form of tragedy—the latter conveying “a joy to the man who dies” (CW5 199).

Ben Levitas has argued that the “lost context” of World War I can “be felt as a ghost limb” in “Easter, 1916.”<sup>2</sup> A tragic interpretation of the Easter Rising is however at the forefront of the poem, as Yeats depicts the transformation of the rebels of the Rising from comedic figures to tragic heroes. Already in the earliest correspondence following the events in the Irish capital, when the poem was still at the planning stage, we find Yeats referring to the Rising and its aftermath as “The Dublin Tragedy.”<sup>3</sup> In another letter, he observes to an American patron that “This Irish business has been a great grief.”<sup>4</sup> Might there be something of a hazy border, or lack of overlap, between tragedy and a messy “business” that causes “great grief”? Edna Longley has noted that “Easter, 1916” is a poem about personal and political shock, in which Ireland “changes its national genre to tragedy.” She also observes, however, that the poem open-endedly poses rather than resolves its central questions.<sup>5</sup>

The final part of “Easter, 1916” famously has recourse to the Young Ireland ballad tradition, yet evidently deploys that generic framework in a manner

that is both equivocal and hesitant. Might something similar be at work in terms of how "Easter, 1916" embraces a tragic narrative? Can the interpretive framework explicitly endorsed by Yeats himself be productively challenged, or supplemented, by an alternative vantage point? Insofar as the poem represents an elegiac deployment of the past, the tragic "regime of memory" it proposes may not tell the whole story.<sup>6</sup> The story tragedy tells makes sense of the deaths of the rebels: their actions may have been violent and seemingly ill-advised (lacking realistic chances of immediate success), and many of them lost their lives, but fate transfigures their memory "Wherever green is worn." What is the alternative to such transfiguration? Yeats's poem places one alternative in open view: "Was it needless death after all?" Futile loss of life would present a very different kind of narrative—one full of "great grief," but not tragic in a heroic sense—compared to the dominant one we find in "Easter, 1916." Still, the poem also gives voice to that alternative history, hesitantly nudging a counter-narrative of incomprehension, fanatical, stone-like hearts, and unbearable suffering out of view even as it lets us glimpse it.

The actual trauma of senseless bloodshed is however kept off-stage. Apart from the executions, the fighting of the Rising itself "at very close range, was grim enough to satisfy the goriest fantasies of hand-to-hand combat."<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that Yeats was deeply struck by the event. As he noted in a letter a couple of months later: "All my habits of thought and work are upset by this tragic Irish rebellion which has swept away friends and fellow workers."<sup>8</sup> But he was far away, in France, when the events took place, and there are no recurring flashbacks of gruesome deaths in his later life. Does the omission of graphic references to violence and death signify a process of textbook repression, creating a complex coupling of witnessing and forgetting typical of traumatic memory? There are other circumstances surrounding "Easter, 1916" and Yeats's response to the Easter Rising that can more confidently be grasped in terms characteristic of Trauma Studies. Although disputed and subject to differing interpretations, the poem's protracted publication history suggests a belated response of the kind characteristic of trauma. Composed between May and September 1916, "Easter, 1916" first circulated privately. As Matthew Campbell points out in another piece in this issue, the text was available—in a small edition printed by Clement Shorter—for readers at the British Museum by June 1917. Yet Yeats waited until 1920 before assuring a wide circulation of it, through publication in the *New Statesman*. This delay has been interpreted as the result of various personal and professional circumstances. The most obvious reason is the fear, which Yeats ascribes to Lady Gregory, of that the poem's "getting about" might damage the cause of obtaining the Huge Lane Pictures for Ireland.<sup>9</sup> The same letter refers to "Easter, 1916" as "the rebellion poem,"

and some critics have indeed been prone to see the delay as more generally linked to Yeats's difficulties with coming to grips with the events of the Rising.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly the poem itself highlights a struggle to comprehend. The refrain's "terrible beauty" has the quality of a wilfully challenging paradox, reminiscent perhaps of Keats's conflation of truth and beauty in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Beyond that puzzle, though, Jahan Ramazani has pointed to how the entire poem, more fundamentally, is characterized by an "epistemological rift [...]" between the knowledge that a change has occurred and the absence of an 'efficient cause' to explain the change.<sup>11</sup> This accounts, for instance, for the second stanza's seemingly slipshod enumeration of personal traits of some of the rebels: all is changed utterly, and the transformation of these ordinary figures into heroic revolutionaries is fundamentally mysterious. Although Yeats implicitly frames the metamorphosis in ways linked to his ideas of literary creativity, magical powers, and tragic plots, none of these is proffered as a straightforward solution. The messy script of everyday life has been overtaken by a symbolical narrative, but the process that has brought this about remains elusive. The resulting "rift" is strongly akin to the sense of blockage and incomprehension that typically features in attempts to interpret traumatic events. In his previously mentioned writings after World War I, Freud famously highlighted how the soldiers were overwhelmed by their combat experiences, repeatedly revisiting the terrible details in compulsive fashion.<sup>12</sup> Yeats would himself revisit the Rising also in literary work written after "Easter, 1916": several of the poems in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* deal with those same events, indicating that Yeats indeed had trouble formulating a definitive and final response. Beyond that context, Yeats continued exploring the ramifications of the Rising in later works such as "The Man and the Echo" and *The Death of Cuchulain*.

Written not long before Yeats's death, over twenty years of the fateful events in the city centre of Dublin, among worries keeping the poet "awake night after night," "The Man and the Echo" includes the following: "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" Yeats's worry, at this juncture, about his early use of sacrificial rhetoric in "that play" *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, is reminiscent of his less-than-convincing disclaimer of propounding anti-Catholic rhetoric in another early play, *The Countess Cathleen*: "In using what I considered traditional symbols I forgot that in Ireland they are not symbols but realities" (CW3 309). Here Yeats's literary treatment of the Easter Rising fits into a larger pattern. In his literary dealings with political issues, he is fascinated by the relationship between symbol and reality. On the one hand, there is a sense of anxiety when the borderlines between them become blurred, and literature risks becoming a subservient form of propaganda—or exist at the mercy of what Yeats takes to be the uncontrollable mob. On the other hand, Yeats also is inexorably attracted to the idea that symbols may have political



efficacy. The latter provides the underlying motivation for much of his theatrical work,<sup>13</sup> and it resurfaces in his treatment of the Rising. Thus the concluding song of *The Death of Cuchulain* ponders upon the historical manifestation of political ideals. Using as an object of meditation Oliver Sheppard's statue of Cuchulain in the General Post Office in Dublin, made to commemorate the Easter Rising, Yeats asks: "Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed / He stood where they had stood?" (VPI 1063). Even in an age alien to tragedy, it is implied, there can still be an essential continuity between the literary creativity that creates lasting myths and the agency behind decisive political acts—both seek to partake in the ideal, embodying a transcendent truth in the world. Here the proximity of *The Death of Cuchulain* to "Easter, 1916" is underlined by a draft version of these lines: "Who has dreamed Cuchullain till it seemed / He stood where they had stood."<sup>14</sup> In "Easter, 1916," Yeats writes of the rebels: "We know their dream; enough / To know they dreamed and are dead."

Crossing from its mythological sources into the stark reality of the General Post Office, and from dream into waking life, the efficacy of the symbol is both a source of affirmation and wariness for Yeats in his interpretations of the Rising. His qualms about "Certain men the English shot" does not quite suggest an instance of perpetrator trauma,<sup>15</sup> but there is at least a sense of complicity—of having indirectly become an accessory to the bloodshed. Seen from such a perspective, the emphasis in the opening stanza of "Easter, 1916" on the distance—particularly the class distance—separating Yeats the clubman from the rebels, comes across as a form of denial. Later, in "Sixteen Dead Men," the rebels would be cast in a role akin to the witches of *Macbeth*: "loitering there / To stir the boiling pot." In Shakespeare's "Scottish play," of course, that boiling pot feeds the hubristic dreams leading the Macbeths to a lasting nightmare of regret and madness. "Man and Echo" indicates that despite the evasive gestures of "Easter, 1916," Yeats cannot prevent himself from identifying with—indeed even seeing himself as an originator of—the Irish rebels' call for sovereign violence.<sup>16</sup> In this light, the sacrificial rhetoric of his early plays is a precursor for the originary moment of founding violence ambivalently celebrated in the refrain "A terrible beauty is born." This would provide at least a partial explanation why Yeats in an early letter to Lady Gregory gave a slightly different version of the same words: "terrible beauty has been born again."<sup>17</sup>

The "terrible" nature of the Rising is of course partly linked to its human cost. A key focus for Trauma Studies has been the extreme suffering issuing out of personal or collective cataclysms. To be traumatized is to have one's agency warped, pathologically subject to the past in a way that inhibits, or skews, one's actions in the present. Van der Kolk and McFarlane have addressed how this may take divergent forms: on the one hand there is the "hyperarousal" that interprets even the most everyday of signals as a dangerous threat, on the other

hand one has a “generalized numbing of responsiveness to a whole range of emotional aspects in life.”<sup>18</sup> This links up with the key trope of the stone in “Easter, 1916.” The final stanza opens by using this figure to ponder on the cost of excessive pain and loss: “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart. / O when may it suffice?” Here there is a suggestion of a collision between the tragic regime, which includes and makes sense of heroic sacrifice, and a more liberal sensitivity to the traumatizing effects of bloodshed. The preceding, more symbolical stanza contrasts the fluidity of life with hearts that “with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone.” The stone-like hearts of the fascinated rebels precede, and may also cause, the stony numbness of the grieving masses, and both are sidelined from the free potentiality of vital, unfettered existence.

Yeats cannot renege on his commitment to life’s generous open-endedness, even while he pays tribute to the epochal importance of the acts of the rebels. The narrative of nationhood provides a possibility of mediating between these contesting concerns. In the poem, a nation is founded by the rebels’ act of violence. The poet is explicitly a witness, whose status as a bearer of testimony uneasily but productively hovers between the categories of *testis* (a neutral, external observer) and *superstes* (a witness who partakes in the event).<sup>19</sup> He provides a measured defence of the rebels’ vision in the court of history, but is also more implicitly an enabling prophet of this decisive, epoch-making event: “their dream” is not alien to Yeats, but rather troublingly familiar. Later key Yeatsian performances such as “The Second Coming” and “Leda and the Swan” would return to such founding acts of violence, albeit on a world stage. More easily identifiable with a particular community and moment in recorded time, “Easter, 1916” can be read as forging a link between “individual trauma” and “historical or generational trauma” as theorized by Cathy Caruth.<sup>20</sup> Yeats insists upon the collective significance of the rebels’ self-sacrifice.

The collective dimension invites a broader perspective. Had Yeats kept the original wording of his refrain, whereby the terrible beauty has been born “again,” it would have underlined the link with earlier uprisings and acts of resistance, including the Young Ireland movement, 1798, and the Wild Geese commemorated in “September, 1913.” Does the stoniness of the rebels’ hearts not only constitute the cause of present trauma, but also amount to a traumatized state resulting from past sacrifices? Between the lines, traces of a more encompassing traumatic narrative appear, “which sees history from the point of view of the losers, the bereaved, the victims.”<sup>21</sup> As it is, by partially occluding that heritage, Yeats suggests that 1916 has the exceptional status of an unprecedented beginning. But it is far from being an innocent or insouciant beginning: by troping the reception of the Rising in terms of a mother’s love for a child—“As a mother names her child / When sleep at last has come”—he implies that

the event carries the freight of almost irreparable debt and loss. Inscribing itself as a collective elegy, "Easter, 1916" marks a communal sense of stupefied grief, transcending the personal identities of MacBride, Connolly and the other participants. As such their individual heroism risks being overshadowed by the collective cataclysm. In this regard Yeats's poem does indeed, whatever his intentions might have been, bear poetical witness to a form of collective trauma, in a manner that lives on even after the death of tragedy.

### Notes

1. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), 15.
2. Ben Levitas, "War, 1914–1923," 48, in David Holdeman and Ben Levitas, eds., *W. B. Yeats in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
3. To Lady Gregory, 11 May 1916, *CL IntelLex* #2950.
4. To John Quinn, 23 May 1916, *CL IntelLex* #2960.
5. Edna Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 121.
6. On "regimes of memory," see Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin, "Regimes of Memory: An Introduction," in Radstone and Hodgkin eds., *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity and Recognition* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006).
7. Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London: Penguin, 2005), 203.
8. To Robert Bridges, 13 June 1916, *CL IntelLex* #2980.
9. To Clement Shorter, 28 March 1916, *CL IntelLex* #3204.
10. Although belated memories have traditionally been associated with trauma, they are not universally acknowledged to be a necessary feature of the condition. See Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 10–15.
11. Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 61.
12. The most thorough working through of these issues takes place in Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, translated by James Strachey (New York: Bantam Books, 1959).
13. On the mob and Yeats's political ambitions for his theatre, see chapter 3 of Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
14. W. B. Yeats, *The Death of Cuchulain: Manuscript Materials, Including the Author's Final Text*, edited by Phillip L. Marcus (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 123.
15. On the concept of perpetrator trauma, see Saira Mohamed, "Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity," in *Columbia Law Review*, volume 115 (2015), 1157–1216.
16. On Yeats's ambivalent relationship to violence, see Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.
17. To Lady Gregory, [11 May 1916], *CL IntelLex* #2950.
18. Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane, *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1996), 12.
19. This opposition is discussed in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 17.
20. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 136 n. 22.
21. Joep Leersen, "Monument and Trauma: Varieties of Remembrance" in Ian McBride, ed., *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 215.

## THE BIOAESTHETICS OF “EASTER, 1916”

*Joseph Valente*

### I

A disability studies approach to W. B. Yeats’s most famous poem, “Easter, 1916,” will almost inevitably focus upon the final stanza, wherein the poet represents but also elides, reckons and fails to reckon, with the biopolitical consequences of the Rising in its ideological context. Often in Yeats’s verse, however, the full significance of such a salient passage, stanza or trope ultimately resides not in what it says but in the structural effects of what it leaves unsaid. In the case of “Easter, 1916,” the question of disability—its place in the Imaginary of patriotic sacrifice, its inescapability as a fortune of war, its deviation from the muscular norms of nationalist embodiment—remains a haunting absence, a reverberating silence to be experienced and evaluated in relation to the formal dynamics whereby the poem constructs the historical event of the same name.

The impetus driving “Easter, 1916” is Yeats’s need to position himself towards the main agents of the Rising in a manner that fully reflects and satisfies his profoundly conflicted feelings about the event itself. To this end, the poem unfolds in an accordion-like structure: Yeats’s vaunted sociocultural distance from the Volunteers collapses into a bardic identification with their enterprise, only to resume along the initial lines before collapsing once more. The first verse establishes this movement and the chains of associations that it carries. Yeats’s superior distance from the mainly middle-class revolutionaries—expressed in his “mocking tale or gibe...at the club”—is located in the recent but continuous past, as indicated by the steady use of the present perfect tense (“have met,” “have paused,” “have lingered,” etc.). The abrupt shift in the verse refrain to the present—“All changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born”—not only compounds the temporal proximity of the now with Yeats’s newfound affective proximity to the martyrs’ agenda, but also conveys the sheer velocity of both Ireland’s transformation and Yeats’s convergence.

Yeats casts both of these developments in an aesthetic, specifically dramaturgical register, which through a subtle reverse logic of self-reference brilliantly qualifies and clarifies his identification with the insurgents. Yeats represents the alienation of the past as low comedy (“where motley is worn”) and opposes it to the present rapture of high tragedy, with that famous phrase, “a terrible beauty,” encapsulating a pragmatic marker of the genre, not unlike

Aristotelian catharsis. The rhyme heralding this shift in dramatic mode, "worn" to "born," makes for an understated allusion to a cultural movement spear-headed by Yeats himself, the Irish Renaissance, whose very name bespeaks the goal of birthing an aesthetic of national self-assertion, a canon of liberationist "beauty." Yeats in effect credits the Easter rebels with bringing a crucial strain of his own life's work to culmination—a view not inconsistent with Patrick Pearse's avowed politics of symbolic renewal. In other words, Yeats identifies with the rebels' project in its prior allegiance to his own.

This dialogical identification concentrates itself in a single object of reference, one with a particular resonance, as it turns out, for a disability reading of the final stanza. The sudden switch here from comedy to tragedy, animated by an ethos of patriotic self-immolation or "blood sacrifice," uncannily (if unconsciously) mimics the dramatic structure of Yeats's most popular contribution to the Irish Renaissance theater, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, whose title character is indeed "changed utterly" into a "terrible beauty" by the doomed patriots answering her call. Counted as a primary source of inspiration among the leaders of the Rising, the play functioned in the same vein as its eponymous national persona: it prompted men to lay down their lives for Ireland in fact much as she summons them to do in fiction. Patrick Pearse paraphrases the play to just this effect in his poem, "A Mother": "They shall be spoken of among their people / The generations shall remember them."<sup>1</sup> As Fintan O'Toole has observed, "The line between Irish theatre and Irish history is not so clear after all,"<sup>2</sup> and, it is important to add, that line was permeable in *either* direction. Long before Yeats worried in "Man and the Echo," "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot," his allusive subtext in "Easter, 1916" retroactively "sent" those same men back into the larger orbit of the play, as the historical exemplars of its crowning action and a material extension of its Revivalist agenda.

The following two verses iterate, with significant variation, the accordion-like pattern of expansion/compression, distance/proximity. In verse two, the movement is redoubled across a catalogue of notable revolutionaries whom Yeats treats individually. He begins with a portrait of Constance Markiewicz. Her "ignorant good will," "shrill" voice, and non-martyred status combine to relegate her to comic status, her recent distance from Yeats provoked and italicized by her foolish estrangement from her own aristocratic youth, with its high responsibilities and solemn prerogatives. Turning to Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh, Yeats changes his mode of address from one of wistful alienation to a sense of fellowship grounded in their shared aesthetic commitments ("rode our winged horse," "daring and sweet his thought"). At the same time, he modulates the tense of his account, first into the past progressive ("was coming") to give the feel of ongoing action, and then into the future perfect ("might have won"), which emphasizes the present of judgment rather than the past being

judged. With reference to “this other man,” John MacBride, Yeats resumes his critical distance and takes it to the extreme, painting him as a comical butt of Shakespearean proportions (“drunken, vainglorious lout”) for actions cast in the past perfect (“had done”). By resigning his part in the “casual comedy,” however, MacBride too enters the present of tragic regeneration.

In switching the focus of the poem from the revolutionaries to a pastoral scene symbolic of their being in the world, the third verse would seem to afford no occasion for the sort of telescoping of perspective we have seen thus far. And yet—the enchanting “stone” metonymic of the single-mindedness of the insurgents, does “trouble the living stream” as an *extrinsic* force in the recent past (“Through summer and winter”) only to become in the spring (“when hens to moor-cocks call”), in the present of the Easter Rising, a central point of identification, organizing the entire panorama (“in the midst of all”). What do we make of Yeats’s decision to sustain this structure of temporal and affective association in a stanza otherwise designed as a figural outlier, a sort of Homeric simile within the larger narrative? I would submit that his purpose is to underscore or call attention to how the x-y coordinates of temporal and personal distance carefully preserved to this point are about to break down in the final verse, and how far this breakdown goes to informing its climactic tenor.

The final stanza fully reverses the trajectory of the previous units. Instead of proceeding from past doubt and disaffiliation from the rebels to a robust ethno-aesthetic identification with their mission, the verse begins with Yeats expressing present skepticism about the Rising and finding reconciliation and solidarity with the martyrs by relegating them, however honorifically, to the past. As the poem opens to the future, Yeats begins to suspect the sufficiency of the “sacrifice,” which is to say blood-sacrifice (“O when may it suffice?”); he then distrusts the necessity of that sacrifice (“Was it needless death after all?”); and he concludes by questioning the very point of the revolutionary demarché (“For England may keep faith”). The only thing Yeats does not doubt in this pregnant moment is “their dream” and the immovable fact of their demise. But their dream remains a construct subject to manifold interpretation and contrary assessment, from mere delusion or fantasy on one side to empowering aspiration on the other. What alone authorizes “their dream” irrefutably for Yeats, what alone indemnifies the value of their dream, irrespective of its possible folly or futility, is the price they were willing to pay for it, and did in fact pay for it. That is why it is not enough for Yeats and his readers to know “their dream,” unless they also know that having dreamed they “are dead.” Death proves the ultimate warrant, erasing all incertitude and rendering all quibbles and cavils moot (“And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?” What does it matter?). *It is death and not the cause of Ireland that ultimately sanctifies the martyrs for Yeats*, and this alone explains the decisive peripeteia of the final verse: past estrangement from



the Irish rebels/present identification with their exploit turns into present skepticism at the exploit/canonization of Irish rebels now past.

If death freely volunteered ratifies the value of their dream, however, it does not settle the question of what its significance might be, nor underwrite any particular interpretation of its meaningfulness. To the contrary, for Yeats their death elevates their dream to a realm beyond everyday meaning or political advantage, confers upon it the dignity of the existential: i.e., the import of their dream becomes coextensive with the grand gesture of sacrificing their lives, willingly, in its name. In this regard, Yeats not only surpasses the aestheticization of politics that was, as we have seen, rife in Ireland at the time, but he alters its very nature. Indeed, while such aestheticization might seem consistent, at first blush, with both the Revivalist nationalism of a Pearse or a Plunkett, and with this poem's initial gloss on the Rising, Yeats has in reality effected another reversal of terms from verse one. No longer is the poetic imagination seen as inciting political action, which then appropriates the aesthetic dimension to itself as a part of its overall significance. Such was the dynamic at work in the "Volunteers" reception of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and in Yeats's cited incorporation of them within the wider ambit of that dramatic scenario. Here, instead, the political action culminates and expends itself in an apotheosis of the rebels themselves, as dreamers rather than fighters. Whereas aesthetic figures had given rise to the framing of material practice, here material practice terminates in the fashioning of aestheticized figures.

The resulting contrast is made plain enough in the text of the poem. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the structural basis for verse 1, the title character endeavors to awaken the children of Ireland (as the *Proclamation* would style them) to *stir* themselves in the national cause. Here in verse 4, Yeats likens his "part" to that of a mother—in context, a variant of Mother Ireland and so Cathleen herself—who "names her child" in order to *still* it and lull it asleep. Now I am not saying that Yeats works to aestheticize death in "Easter, 1916" nor that he is unwary of the temptation to do so engendered by the doctrine of blood sacrifice. Indeed, he allows a false start in his conclusive recitation of heroes, a rift between his oral announcement ("to murmur name upon name") and his written execution ("I write it out in verse") for the precise purpose of staging his refusal to succumb to that very temptation.

To murmur name upon name,

As a mother names her child  
When sleep at last has come  
On limbs that had run wild.  
What is it but nightfall?  
No, no, not night but death;



But if Yeats acknowledges in order to forestall the eulogistic reflex of dressing mortality in soothing metaphor, if he sees clearly through the aestheticization of death, he is far less vigilant or circumspect when it comes to mobilizing death *as* a mode of aestheticization. Even as Yeats nullifies his figural equation of death and nightfall, he leaves in place the sleeping child of great energy and limbs as an image of the martyrs to be hallowed. Perhaps this figure is meant to suggest a youthful death, of the kind the Volunteers suffer, but it also suggests a death that leaves undisturbed the health and vigor of its subject, or, to take matters further, a death whose sanitized cast actually serves to preserve healthy and vigorous embodiment as a patriotic, even sacrificial ideal.

## II

At this point, it proves useful to bring a disability studies perspective to bear on the colonial struggle that contoured Easter, 1916, both the event and the poem. The imperialist discourse of stereotype and stigmatization took an ableist complexion with the emergence of the biopolitically charged racism that Michel Foucault analyzes in *Society Must be Defended*. The timing was fortuitous. The last great decolonizing push that eventuated in the Rising coincided with the developmental stage in European biopower that was “almost completely covered,” as Foucault observes, by the discourse of degeneration.<sup>3</sup> As white subalterns enfolded within the British metropole, the Irish had every reason to be anxious about being ethnically profiled as an adulterate locus of degenerative contagion, every reason to recognize and fear that the ideological justification for continued British rule would come to reside in the imputation of racial disability to the “mere” or Irish-Irish, whether that disability be couched in terms of anatomical infirmity, alcohol addiction, a more psychotic addiction to violence, dyshygienic predilections, or hysterical over-emotionalism and a corresponding vitiation of the rational faculty. Revivalist nationalism, accordingly, advanced in a context defined by what Robert McRuer has designated “compulsory able-bodiedness”<sup>4</sup> and, under the pressure of imperialistic denigration, aligned its decolonizing agenda with that principle. The impetus of Irish nationalism generally—physical and moral force, political and cultural—was to rehabilitate from the degenerative consequences of colonial domination an Irish body politic often imaged in terms of actual infirm bodies. Even the ethos of blood sacrifice, as articulated in the graveside oratory of Patrick Pearse, was conceived not as submitting Irish bodies, Irish men, to impairment and destruction but as renewing the Irish body and Irish manhood from a degeneracy understood, in the biopolitics of the time, to be a blood-borne malady.

The conflation of national viability and autonomy with normative bodily strength and soundness, ethnic with somatic integrity, shaped not only the credo of blood sacrifice, its perceived stakes and consequences, but how the act of martyrdom itself could be imagined. Since the death embraced in patriotic song and story was not to count as the crowning impairment of Irish (bodies) but rather to function as a psychosymbolic shield against such impairment, as a defense of a normative, racialized somatic integrity, the act of martyrdom would of ideological necessity be depicted as unravaged by the sort of physical trauma that would challenge or destroy that integrity. And such proved to be generally the case. In the years leading up to Easter 1916, the era of Yeats's "casual comedy," Revivalists envisaged death for Ireland as a pristine, clean death, one that left the body essentially intact.

The nationalist template for this vision, adopted from the signature Christian trope of transfiguration, was Yeats and Gregory's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. While the Poor Old Woman freely, proudly prognosticates slaughter for her devoted courtiers, she never represents their physical frames as being shattered or in any way degraded, as being marked by anything more severe than a change from red to white cheeks. The one courtier central to the drama, Michael Gillane, "rushes" to meet his end offstage and thus leaves us with an impression of robust embodiment that is conserved in, rather than despoiled by its self-immolation. The consequent metamorphosis of Cathleen from decrepit hag to stately girl, symbolizing the renewal of the Irish body politic, comes at the cost of Michael's life, but not the normative proportions or dynamism of his physique.

Upon opening St. Enda's, Patrick Pearse had a not unrelated dream of a boy abiding his execution for Mother Ireland. Like Michael Gillane, he is suspended in the youthful perfection of masculine able-bodiedness, protected by his imminent martyrdom from the slightest damage. In his play *The Singer*, Pearse goes a step further. He contrives to limn the young patriots of his political dreams as being safeguarded from bodily trauma even in their imagined death. Speaking through the title character's sweetheart, Sighle, he portrays the perspective slaughter of Irish rebels as an aestheticized dream-vision of beautiful, clean white bodies dabbled with just a bit of red blood, rather like subjects of a pre-Raphaelite painting.<sup>5</sup>

With his wild limbs, hallmarks of athletic able-bodiedness, Yeats's allegorical sleeping child of "Easter, 1916" can be seen to invoke precisely this established, ultra-hygienic strain in the Revivalist portraiture of martyrdom—can be read, that is, as a deliberate type of a certain nationalist subgenre. But whereas this pristine iconography took shape in advance of the Rising, Yeats's poem was written in the immediate aftermath of the event, which not only saw dozens of rebels and hundreds of civilians die, but saw thousands wounded,

debilitated or disabled,<sup>6</sup> and all suffer physical impairment to one degree or another, a shattering of those metaphorical “limbs.” To figure the martyrs and by extension their enterprise in terms of a once frenetically active and now dormant but intact child is, at minimum, to airbrush the disabling of Irish bodies that the Rising entailed, while tacitly espousing a conventional or classic paradigm of aesthetics that would disqualify bodies thus disabled or out of frame from the canons of beauty. Is there a substantive distinction—ethical, political or otherwise—to be drawn between the proleptic exclusion of likely physical trauma and disability in the literary summons to blood sacrifice and the post-hoc elision of the traumatic effects of its enactment? I would argue, yes, a crucial distinction, and one that consists with the poem’s overall “drift,” both its progress and its meaning.

The proleptic exclusion of Irish physical harm, disfigurement and mutilation was designed to serve revivalist nationalism directly, a central tenet of which, that blood sacrifice will renovate the Irish race on normative geo- and bio-political lines, would be viscerally challenged by images of prospective martyrs broken or maimed.<sup>7</sup> But once the event occurs, widespread bodily insult becomes an irrefutable fact that will either be taken to belie the rehabilitationist premise underlying the sacrificial endeavor or will be taken to countersign the ethno-national renewal already assumed into evidence. Accordingly the post-hoc elision of the physical impairments wrought by the Easter Rising tended to serve the cause at best indirectly, performing what we might call a hagiographic function: even as attention to the great majority of the victims (the “civilians” or bystanders) was muted at best, the sainted leaders of the Rising, having been executed out of public view, were resurrected as immaculate remembered images in the popular mind and could therefore stand as emblems of the renovative power of nationalist soteriology. In retracting its initial endorsement of the Rising and offering in its stead an exaltation of martyrdom *as such*, “Easter, 1916” takes hagiography to the point at which it exceeds and even annuls itself. Its post-hoc elision of the violence done the bodies of the rebels obeys the same logic. That is to say, Yeats figures the martyrs in a state of stilled yet unmarred able-bodiedness not to confirm the galvanizing power of their specific dream—a possibility entertained earlier in the poem—but in veneration of their willingness to die for *a* dream. More than just the secularization of hagiography that we saw in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, this is, if you will, hagiography without any church or creed, a highly aestheticized mode of hagiography analogous in its domain to Kant’s purposiveness without purpose.

It is also a highly personalized form of hagiography, in which the movement may be said to live on in the service of the martyrs, rather than the martyrs dying in service of the movement. Consider: if death alone, and not the cause to die for, is what sanctifies the martyrs, then the corollary must be that death

sanctifies the martyrs alone and not the cause they died for. The conclusion of "Easter, 1916" confirms this ratio in an astonishing contrast with the poem's beginning. The inaugural instance of redemptive transformation, at the end of verse 1, seems to embrace the Irish nation at large: "all is changed." But after Yeats registers misgivings about the Rising in verse 4, the Irish nation is abruptly cast as the mere context wherein the martyrs themselves—MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly, and Pearse—undergo redemptive transformation. "Wherever green is worn," they are all that is utterly changed. And while this metamorphosis is recorded in the present and the future, it befalls the martyrs only in the memory of yesteryear, of which Yeats proclaimed them an indestructible remnant. The poem thus completes its scissor-like reversal of present and past in the only temporal dimension where "The [martyred] body is not bruised"<sup>8</sup>... or impaired or disabled: what we might call the epitaphic Imaginary.

### Notes

1. Padriac Pearse, *Poems, Stories, Plays* (Dublin: Talbot Press, n.d.), 333.
2. Fintan O'Toole, "Where Irish Theatre and Irish History Meet," *Irish Times*, Saturday, March 11, 2000.
3. Michel Foucault, "The Abnormals" in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1997), 51.
4. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory* (New York: NYU, 2006), 2.
5. Padraic Pearse, *The Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Plays, Stories, Poems* (Dublin: Maunsel and Roberts, 1922), 9.
6. Ronan McGreevy, "New Research Suggests 485 People Were Killed in the Easter Rising," *The Irish Times*, Thur. March 12, 2015; "Easter 1916," [www.Easter1916.net](http://www.Easter1916.net); John Dorney, "The Easter Rising: A Brief Overview," The Irish Story [www.theirishstory.com/2011/04/22/the-easter-rising--abriefoverview](http://www.theirishstory.com/2011/04/22/the-easter-rising--abriefoverview)
7. The most comprehensive account of the racist construction of Irishness during the late colonial era can be found in L. P. Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts* (Bridgeport: Bridgeport UP, 1968) and *Apes and Angels* (Newton and Abbott: David and Charles, 1971). The most mordant account can be found in Liz Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story* (London: IOI, 1983). For the gendered contours of such imperial racism and the constraints it placed on Irish counterdiscourse, see my *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922* (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 2011), 1–25.
8. W. B. Yeats, "Among School Children," *VP*, 445: 58.

## THE AVIAN RISING: YEATS, MULDOON, AND OTHERS

*Lucy McDiarmid*

### I. SKYLARKS RISING

**T**he birds of 1916 are ubiquitous. Casement heard them on Banna Strand. In a passage that has become famous, his most eloquent prose ever, Casement wrote his sister,

When I landed in Ireland that morning (about 3 am) swamped and swimming ashore on an unknown strand, I was happy for the first time for over a year. Although I knew that this fate waited on me, I was for one brief spell happy and smiling once more. I cannot tell you what I felt. The sand hills were full of skylarks rising in the dawn, the first I had heard in years—the first sound I heard through the surf was their song as I waded through the breakers and they kept rising all the time up to the old rath at Currahane where I stayed and sent the others on and all round were primroses and wild violets and the singing of the skylarks in the air and I was back in Ireland again.<sup>1</sup>

At Trinity College, Elsie Mahaffy, the Provost's daughter, recorded the presence of birds in the garden every day of Easter week, including the day the British Army shelled Liberty Hall: "...and in the garden all the birds who had sung and warbled sweetly through all the previous noises, became mute, huddling together in terrified clusters."<sup>2</sup> And Commandant W. J. Brennan-Whitmore of the Irish Volunteers, as eloquent as Casement and Mahaffy, noted the gulls during a vigil on the roof of his North Earl Street command post:

Until I stood on the rooftops after midnight I never realised what uneasy birds seagulls were. They seemed to have no settled regime of repose, like the other members of the feathered tribes, but kept on wheeling, dipping and rising throughout the darkening hours, calling continuously to one another with their shrill cries.<sup>3</sup>

Standing on the roof at midnight, Brennan-Whitmore, too, must have felt "uneasy," with his own "regime of repose" unsettled and disturbed. Mahaffy, a firm Unionist who despised the rebels, seemed somehow able to imagine the feelings of the "terrified" birds. Casement writes "I cannot tell you what I felt," and then—to tell what he felt—describes the skylarks "rising in the dawn." For these

witnesses to different moments of the Easter Rising, imputing feelings to birds offered a form of emotional release.

In a more complex expressive mode, poems about 1916 allude intertextually to other bird-poems or native Irish birds to interpret the Rising. The first line of Francis Ledwidge's "Thomas McDonagh" (*sic*) alludes to MacDonagh's translation of "An Bonnán Buí" ("The Yellow Bittern") by Cathal Buí Mac Giolla Ghunna:

He shall not hear the bittern cry  
In the wild sky, where he is lain,  
Nor voices of the sweeter birds,  
Above the wailing of the rain.<sup>4</sup>

The west of Ireland birds in Yeats's "Easter, 1916," unlike the rebels, participate in the "living stream," busily engaged in courtship activities: "The long-legged moor-hens dive / And hens to moor-cocks call..." And one of the newest Rising poems, Paul Muldoon's "1916: The Eoghan Rua Variations," invokes the anonymous 12th-century Middle-English debate poem "The Owl and the Nightingale" as well as Yeats's birds to construct an avian version of 1916.<sup>5</sup>

Muldoon's poem was commissioned by New York University's Glucksman Ireland House, and it is one of the longest of the commemorative poems published in 2016. The title and the epigraph direct readers to Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, the 18th-century poet and author of the beautiful quatrain that forms Muldoon's poem's epigraph:

*Do threascair an saol is shéid an ghaoth mar small.  
Alastrann, Caesar, 's an méid sin a bhí 'na bpáirt;  
tá an Teamhair 'na féar, is féach an Traoi mar tá,  
is na Sasanaigh féin do bhféidir go bhfaighidís bás*

The whole world is laid waste. Cinders flying through the air.  
Caesar and Alexander and their battle-throngs.  
There's hardly a trace of Tara. Troy's barely there.  
The English themselves will shortly be moving along.<sup>6</sup>

Each of the poem's nine stanzas ends with a different English translation of the quatrain, a quasi-apocalyptic vision of imperial dissolution not unlike the "Falling towers" passage in *The Waste Land*: "Now the world's been brought low. The wind's heavy with soot" or "The wind blows ash now the world's completely destroyed" or "The air tastes of grit. The world offers no safe berth" (13, 14, 20).

Although Yeats is never quoted directly, he, too, is present as a source. Typically Yeatsian words are used in the eighth stanza—"From a burst sand-bag a skein of sand / winds as it's unwound"—and in a larger, subtler way, the entire poem engages in conversation with Yeats: it revises Yeats's birds; not all of them, but the politicized birds. The flirtatious moor-hen and moor-cock of "Easter, 1916" stand as a rebuke to the revolutionaries who have "Hearts with one purpose alone" and seem "enchanted to a stone." In "The Stare's Nest by My Window," the sixth section of "Meditations in Time of Civil War," the "mother birds" nurture and the bees build, while human beings, the Republicans and the Free-Staters, kill one another:

The bees build in the crevices  
Of loosening masonry, and there  
The mother birds bring grubs and flies.  
My wall is loosening; honey-bees,  
Come build in the empty house of the stare. (VP 424)

The end of a much earlier poem, "To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures," urges a gift to the Gallery because it will furnish "the right twigs for an eagle's nest" (VP 288). In the Yeats examples cited, birds—especially in their nest-building capacities—offer a model and exemplar for humans.

In Muldoon's poem, however, birds stand in for humans: the poem is framed as "a dispute / between a starch-shirt cuckoo / and a meadow pipit." The Rising itself is represented as a nest, a provisional home for the Irish in which their future is incubating, but a nest which the British will occupy, as the cuckoo lays its eggs in the meadow pipit's nest. The Rising therefore constitutes a stage in the reproductive process; the rebels who created it are closer to Yeats's moor-hens and moor-cocks, and not the slightest bit stone-like. Moreover, in typically Muldoonian self-reference, the poem itself forms a nest: it is constructed in such a way that it embodies, in its poetics, the characteristics of a nest. The identification of the Rising and the poem with the meadow pipit's nest suggests both a life-giving impulse as a source of the Rising and the vulnerability of the republic which it hopes to engender.

The speaker of Yeats's "Easter, 1916" is famously ambivalent, and Muldoon's is also, though in a different way. His poem's vision is not easy to define politically. The speaker—not necessarily Muldoon himself—appears to be commenting on the Rising in real time: he (the masculine pronoun is used advisedly) is "en route from Drumcondra / to the GPO," and he seems to have close-up views, in the present tense, of some of the major players. The first-person pronouns associate Muldoon's speaker with the rebels: "On Stephen's Green we got a whiff



of that chlorine gas..."; and "For ourselves, there's a dearth / of humour." But it would be wrong to label him militant, and grand, heroic gestures are never mentioned. Ineffective gestures, however, accumulate: the rebels "founder" in a "general morass," and the firing pin of a rifle sticks. MacDonagh, commandant at Jacob's Biscuits, appears distracted from the military situation: he is "tapping out some rhythmic verse on a biscuit tin." And "we ourselves," writes the speaker-rebel, "meet brute strength with brute / determination." The repeated Eoghan Rua lines contribute an elegiac tone to every stanza. At the very least, it can be said that the revision of Yeats, the poem's argument or "dispute," resides in the speaker's sympathy for the rebels. They are "bound / by honor alone," and the enjambment suggests that the binding is not tight enough.<sup>7</sup>

## II. THE MEADOW PIPIT'S NEST

The poem's sympathy is indicated in the opening lines by the route the speaker is walking. Yeats's speaker in "Easter, 1916" meets the future rebels "at close of day" on the streets of Dublin and, passing "them," utters "polite meaningless words" before going on to joke about them in comfort with his friends "Around the fire at the club..." But Muldoon's speaker is one of "them." He is on his way to join the Rising (approaching it from the north): "On Easter Monday I was still en route / from Drumcondra to the GPO..." The first stanza also echoes the beginning of "The Owl and the Nightingale":

I was in a valley in springtime; in a very secluded corner, I heard an owl and a nightingale holding a great debate... The nightingale began the argument in the corner of a clearing, and perched on a beautiful branch—there was plenty of blossom around it—in an impenetrable hedge, with reeds and green sedge growing through it.<sup>8</sup>

On Easter Monday I was still en route  
from Drumcondra to the GPO when I overheard a dispute  
between a starch-shirt cuckoo  
and a meadow pipit, the pipit singing even as it flew  
between its perch on a wicker-covered carboy  
and the nest it had improvised near a clump of gorse...  
from strands of linen spun by Henry Joy  
and the mane of a stalking horse.  
The cuckoo that had shouldered out the hoi polloi  
showing not a hint of remorse...(13)

The Irish meadow pipit is a small, brown, streaked "ground bird," preferring bogs, "rough pastures and uplands." Its call is a "rapid vist-vist-vist" that sounds

when it is “alarmed or flushed from cover.” It resembles the skylarks that Casement heard on Banna Strand. The Irish cuckoo breeds in “open areas which hold their main Irish host species,” the meadow pipit.<sup>9</sup> The choice of bird species places sympathy on the small, vulnerable, native bird, “singing even as it flew” (not unlike the poets in the Rising) and not the larger bird that occupies the pipit’s nest (and “shouldered out” the people).<sup>10</sup>

The nest that Muldoon’s meadow pipit has “improvised near a clump of gorse” is central to the poem’s meaning. It is a nest that has been made “from strands of linen spun by Henry Joy / and the mane of a stalking horse.” In other words, the “nest” or provisional home, the Rising with its garrisons, was constructed from the inspiration of the 1798 rebellion, and it “stalks” by means of concealing its real intentions.<sup>11</sup> In the final stanza, Muldoon refers again to the nest:

Those who can’t afford a uniform may wear a blue armband  
from which the meadow pipit filches a single strand  
to bind its nest. The rest of us are bound  
by honor alone. The English pound  
the GPO while we ourselves meet brute strength with brute  
determination. The pipit interweaves wondrous blue  
and that workaday sandbag jute.

The “wondrous blue” is no doubt “St Patrick’s blue,” the official national color of Ireland. The idealism of the rebels’ notion of an independent nation is reinforced—as the GPO was during the Rising—at the practical level with sandbags, made of the coarse fiber called jute.

In all these details, and in the rest of the final stanza—in, as Matthew Campbell has written in another context, the “virtuoso control of a poetic form which consistently draws attention to itself”—Muldoon gives hints about the structure of his poem.<sup>12</sup> The mention of the nest in the first and last stanzas, as well as the words “first” and “last,” informs his readers how to understand the poem:

That the O’Rahilly was the last to know of the impending to-do  
but first to execute  
the plan of attack is ever so slightly skewed.

Those lines and the final Eoghan Rua variation (“For the English, perhaps, their time will come around”), insist on the connection between the beginning and the end of the poem; the poem has “come around.” The primary shaping feature is the rhyme scheme, which interweaves the stanzas in the same way the pipit “interweaves” strands of different kinds to make its nest. The rhyme scheme of

each stanza is the same—AABB, CDCDCD, ABAB—and is thus woven in to itself at the same time as it leads out to the next stanza, whose lines both connect and move the poem forward. The second stanza rhymes CCDD, EFEFEE, CDCD. The rhymes at the beginning of each stanza connect it with the *middle* of the previous one, creating a stabler, more tightly bound structure than connections at bottom and top would make.<sup>13</sup> The C and D rhymes of the final stanza (brute, blue, just, to-do, execute, skewed) connect that stanza with the A and B rhymes of the first: route, dispute, cuckoo, flew). The complex pattern thus interweaves the successive stanzas to one another as well as the last to the first.

In fact the poem itself is configured like a nest, the shape of its nine stanzas “ever so slightly skewed” but almost symmetrically arranged around the central fifth stanza. Visualized in this form, with the first four stanzas and the last four spreading up on either side of the fifth, the poem looks like a nest; and just as the meadow pipit’s nest is “on the ground hidden in dense vegetation,” so the fifth stanza rests (as the Irish Citizen Army under Commandant Michael Mallin and Constance Markievicz did briefly) in Stephen’s Green: it begins, “I’ve watched Countess Markievicz striding through the oaks.”<sup>14</sup> A later line in the same stanza refers to the “general morass / in which we founder,” and the word “morass,” whose first meaning is “an area of muddy or boggy ground,” evokes the bogs preferred by the meadow pipit, where this “ground bird” rests. The fifth stanza’s allusions to Cawnpore hints at Mallin’s spell with the British Army in India (though he was not at the Siege of Cawnpore).

A look at the stanzas ranged around and framing the fifth stanza shows connections that reinforce the symmetry. The first and ninth stanzas both talk explicitly about the woven nest (“improvised” from “strands of linen spun by Henry Joy / and the man of a stalking horse” in the first, and “The pipit interweaves wondrous blue / and that workaday sandbag jute” in the ninth). The second and eighth stanzas both mention the *Asgard* and the Howth gun-running and focus on weapons and tools. The third and the seventh both use the phrase “On Stephen’s Green” and integrate two quotations from rebel Protestants into the poetry (from Casement in the third, from Markievicz in the seventh). The fourth and sixth stanzas have no such obvious connections, but there’s a subtler one. The fourth stanza mentions what Plunkett is doing, and the sixth mentions what MacDonagh is doing: as I discuss in *At Home in the Revolution: what women said and did in 1916*, MacDonagh and Plunkett were sending messages to one another between Jacob’s and the GPO during Easter Week.<sup>15</sup> The final such message was never delivered because the GPO was inaccessible, so in a sense there is a connection *manqué* between the two stanzas.

But as the final stanza says, describing both the Rising itself and the poem, the “plan” is “ever so slightly skewed.” As befits a poem that embodies the

characteristics of a bird's nest and of the Rising's garrisons, the structure is not perfectly symmetrical. The phrase "On Stephen's Green" appears in three stanzas, the sixth as well as the third and the fifth; The O'Rahilly darts in and out of the poem, appearing in stanzas two, four, and nine; the phrase "shaking from stem to stern" is used of Casement's submarine in stanza three and the meadow pipit's nest in stanza six; and the bird's nest is mentioned implicitly in six when the meadow pipit "pointed to the shell / of the cuckoo's egg she'd been condemned / to billet."<sup>16</sup> The "men with a hand / on the tiller" of the *Asgard*, said in the poem to be "familiar with Tory Sound," were actually from Gola Island, not Tory Island, as Muldoon knows well; but "Tory" is echoed in the word "Troy" of the Eoghan Rua quatrain. Finally, the rhyme "skewed" doesn't quite rhyme perfectly with its fellow B-rhymes "blue" and "to-do."

### III THE YELLOW BITTERN

Intertextuality may function as argument, as homage, or as confirmation of a continuing tradition. The avian intertextuality of 2016 poems, like that of 1916 poems, is especially complex, and two poets of 1916, Ledwidge and Yeats, feature prominently. Bernard O'Donoghue's "Migration," published in his 2016 volume *The Seasons of Cullen Church*, invokes Ledwidge's "The Blackbirds" (later published as "Lament for the Poets: 1916"), in which Ledwidge writes,

I heard the Poor Old Woman say:  
"At break of day the fowler came,  
And took my blackbirds from their songs..."<sup>17</sup>

Echoing these lines in homage, O'Donoghue mentions the migratory blackbirds from "the North Sea and Baltic" and memorializes Ledwidge as Ledwidge memorialized the 1916 poets who died in the Rising: "The fowler came at break of day, and took him / from his song."<sup>18</sup> O'Donoghue's enjambment is as witty as any of Muldoon's, separating Ledwidge "from his song." His alliteration links the poets and birds: "back road," "blackbirds," "battalions," and "Baltic."

The nest in "1916: The Eoghan Rua Variations" forms part of a dispute with Yeats, who is glancingly alluded to a number of times. The bird's nest reappears in the text of Muldoon's anthem "100 Years a Nation," but there it functions as an homage that also situates the text in a literary tradition. Imagining an improved Ireland of the future, Muldoon writes, "from a ruined nest / the starling builds afresh." The "stare" at Yeats's window, as his note makes clear, is a starling, and here Muldoon deliberately invokes that poem (VP 424, 827). In the Ireland imagined in the anthem, birds constitute a central feature of an environmentally pure and peaceful older Ireland and of the future Ireland, where

birdsong is audible because there is no war. They appear in Irish and in English in a chorus read by the narrator and sung by the adult chorus and the children's chorus: "is fearr linn ceol binn na n-éan," "we'd sooner the music of birds."

Another bird also appears in "100 Years a Nation," the yellow bittern.<sup>19</sup> The yellow bittern features several times: it appears at the beginning in the pre-colonial era of "Finn and his men": "a yellow bittern booms once more." Much later, in a time of rebellion, other sounds accompany the bittern's note:

we heard not just the bittern boom  
but mortar detonations  
smoke rising in a ragged plume  
the flags the conflagration  
the bloody wave the bloody spume  
from which might spring a nation (32)

In post-Celtic-Tiger time, the bittern will reappear:

the bittern booms once more  
music of the birds  
by turf bank and sea shore  
that we choose to take  
the higher ground  
is bound to be a trait that perseveres  
one hundred years,  
one hundred years,  
one hundred years a nation (38)

The return of the bittern marks an especially pertinent indication of the ideal Irish future because few bitterns are left in Ireland. "The bittern was a common bird in Ireland until the mid-19th century," notes the National Museum of Ireland, but they "became rarer in Ireland and stopped breeding here in the 1840s" when "bogs and marshes were drained for agricultural purposes" and the "harvesting of reeds" affected the ecological balance necessary for their habitat. However, as the National Museum says, and as Muldoon's anthem predicts, "a few sightings of bitterns in recent years" suggest they may be coming back.<sup>20</sup>

The yellow bittern is associated with more than just an Irish "higher ground." Because of the literary history of this bird, to mention it is to invoke Ledwidge, who elegized Thomas MacDonagh, who translated Mac Giolla Ghunna's "An Bonnán Buí." Through birds with poetic histories, Muldoon's anthem invites into his imagined future Ireland some of the great Irish poets of the past. However glancingly, their songs are mixed in with those of the birds.

And invoking the yellow bittern, Muldoon may also be associated with two of the poet-revolutionaries of 1916 and with another prose account of the Rising.<sup>21</sup> A hidden message of the Rising, known only through the pension application and witness statements of a young girl, informs us of the last message sent by MacDonagh to Joseph Plunkett. On Friday, 28 April, MacDonagh in the garrison at Jacob's sent a message to Plunkett in the GPO. The message was never delivered, because the fifteen-year-old girl to whom it was given, Mary McLoughlin, never made it to the post office. She was "taken into custody" by a British soldier and brought to stay with the family of another soldier. The undelivered message was a verbal one: when she met MacDonagh, "He would not give me any message except to say, if I got back to Plunkett in the G.P.O., the words 'Yellow Bittern.'"<sup>22</sup>

McLoughlin makes no comment about the mysterious, two-word message, and it seems unlikely she recognized the reference: her witness statement does not mention that she knew Irish or MacDonagh's poems. She says "the words," not "the reference" or "the title." The allusion is so recondite that few Irish people at the time would have understood it. This message is one of the most oblique expressions of emotion on record for 1916. To those who recognise it, it is richly suggestive and moving.

"The yellow bittern" is of course MacDonagh's English translation of "An Bonnán Buí," alluded to in Ledwidge's opening lines: "He shall not hear the bittern cry / In the wild sky, where he is lain..." No doubt MacDonagh had discussed the poem in Irish and his own translation with Plunkett, who was also a poet. The two men had met when MacDonagh was hired to tutor Plunkett in Irish; they became close friends, worked together at the Irish Theatre Company, and married sisters, Muriel Gifford and Grace Gifford.

What exactly was the meaning of this undelivered message for which Mary McLoughlin was the conduit? Fortunately she remembered the message thirty-eight years later and delivered it to future readers of the pension applications in the Military Service Pensions Collection and of the witness statements of the Bureau of Military History.<sup>23</sup> The message could refer to the bird itself or to the whole poem. If to the former, it was an oblique way of sending the sad message that MacDonagh and Plunkett were soon to be dead, like the yellow bittern of the poem:

The yellow bittern that never broke out  
In a drinking bout, might as well have drunk;  
His bones are thrown on a naked stone  
Where he lived alone like a hermit monk.  
O yellow bittern! I pity your lot,  
Though they say that a sot like myself is curst—

I was sober a while, but I'll drink and be wise  
For I fear I should die in the end of thirst.

Maybe MacDonagh was thinking of this passage:

Oh! if I had known you were near your death,  
While my breath held out I'd have run to you  
Till a splash from the Lake of the Son of the Bird  
Your soul would have stirred and waked anew.<sup>24</sup>

And if the allusion was to the whole poem, it conveyed the brief narrative of someone who knew that he himself would soon be dead, like the bird he sees, and he'd like a drink ("Come, son of my soul, and drain your cup, / You'll get no sup when your life is past"), in fact a large drink: "a dram won't stop our thirst this night."

Either way, the message would have been a gesture of friendship, a reminder of their intimacy and love for one another, their common love of the Irish language and of poetry, and an acknowledgement of the fate they were both likely to meet soon. To invoke it at all is to catch the tone of the poem, its elegant, wry, witty, elegiac attitude to the bird's death, and to affirm comradeship with a man who was soon, though only for a few hours, to become MacDonagh's brother-in-law. According to the biography of Plunkett by his grand-niece Honor Ó Brolcháin, Plunkett never saw MacDonagh after the surrender. Plunkett's brother Jack said that while he and Joe were "sitting on the floor of that disgusting gymnasium in Richmond Barracks," Joe "was worrying a lot about Tomás M[a]cDonagh." Although MacDonagh had also been brought to Richmond Barracks, "Joe didn't know he was there. They had not seen each other since the previous Sunday and it is almost certain that they did not see or speak to each other again."<sup>25</sup> So the message remained undelivered and uninterpreted, its affection and wit preserved only by the dutiful though uncomprehending Mary McLoughlin.

Like the skylarks, the birds in the Provost's garden, the Dublin gulls, the starling, the meadow pipit, the cuckoo, and the blackbirds, the yellow bittern features in an Irish cultural imaginary that crosses from landscape to textscape, from prose to poetry, and from poem to poem. Seen in the sky or the garden or outside the window, the birds are carriers of emotion, inscribed in Irish political and literary history.

### Acknowledgments

NLI 13,600 (Roger Casement's letter of 25 July 1916 to his sister Mrs Nina Newman) is quoted Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



TCD, MARL, MS 2074 (Elsie Mahaffy's "The Irish Rebellion") is quoted with the permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin.

I am grateful to Matthew Campbell and Hugh Haughton for reading this essay, for giving me excellent advice, and for telling me about many other modern Irish poetic birds.

## Notes

1. NLI 13,600 (copy) as quoted in Séamas Ó Síocháin, *Roger Casement: Imperialist, Rebel, Revolutionary* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2007), 440, n. 4, 609.
2. TCD, MARL, MS 2074, Mahaffy, "The Irish Rebellion," 36r.
3. W. J. Brennan-Whitmore, *Dublin Burning: The Easter Rising from Behind the Barricades* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996), 74.
4. *The Complete Poems of Francis Ledwidge* (New York: Brentano's, 1919), 206.
5. There are many medieval bird-debate poems, most of them mentioning a bird's "perch." For the complete text of "The Owl and the Nightingale" in the Middle English, see <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=cme;idno=OwlC>, from the print source published by Cambridge University Press in 1922. For a translation into Modern English, see *The Owl and the Nightingale* (London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ix [C], ff. 233ra–246ra Oxford, Jesus College MS 29 [J], ff. 156ra–168vb) at <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/~wpwt/trans/owl/owltrans.htm>.
- For an analysis of Yeats's birds, see Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 104–129. For comments on Muldoon's birds, see Matthew Campbell, 'Muldoon's Remains,' in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 170–188. For the particular comments on birds, see 181–183. Countless birds appear in Muldoon's poems from the earliest work to the present; this essay looks specifically at those in "1916: The Eoghan Rua Variations" and the text of the anthem "100 Years a Nation." Both of those commissioned 2016 works, as well as others, are published in Paul Muldoon, *Rising to the Rising* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co Meath: Gallery Press, 2016). I am grateful to Paul Muldoon for letting me see the proofs of this book. Muldoon also comments on Yeats's birds in his essay on "All Souls' Night" in *The End of the Poem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 3–28.
6. *Rising to the Rising*, 13, 15. All future parenthetical page references to Muldoon's 2016 poems will be to this edition.
7. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poem "fota an Bháis" invokes Yeats as a conversational equal with reference to his poem on The O'Rahilly: "B'fhíor gach ní adúirt Yeats" ("Every word that Yeats wrote was true," as Ní Dhomhnaill translated that line in an email message of 6 April 2016). For the complete text, see *A Poet's Rising* (Dublin: Irish Writers Centre, 2016), unnumbered pages.
8. Wessex Parallel WebTexts, "The Owl and the Nightingale" translation, <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/~wpwt/trans/owl/owltrans.htm>
9. Information about the meadow pipit and the cuckoo is taken from three websites: "Cuckoo" and "Meadow Pipit," BirdWarch Ireland <http://www.birdwatchireland.ie/IrelandsBirds/Cuckoos/Cuckoo/tabid/1096/Default.aspx> <http://www.birdwatchireland.ie/IrelandsBirds/PipitsWagtails/MeadowPipit/tabid/1036/Default.aspx> "Meadow Pipit," Irelandseye.com, [http://www.irelandseye.com/aarticles/travel/nature/birds/small\\_ground\\_birds/meadow\\_pipit/meadow\\_pipit.htm](http://www.irelandseye.com/aarticles/travel/nature/birds/small_ground_birds/meadow_pipit/meadow_pipit.htm) "Meadow Pipit," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meadow\\_pipit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meadow_pipit)

10. There are rough functional, though not ornithological, similarities between the nightingale and the meadow pipit, because both are associated in their poems with song, and between the owl and the cuckoo, because both are associated with strength and aggression. For interpretations of the nightingale and the owl, see "Introduction," J. W. H. Atkins, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1922), xi–xc. Online via the Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/owlandnightingale00atkiuoft>
11. A "stalking horse" is "a screen traditionally made in the shape of a horse behind which a hunter may stay concealed when stalking prey. Later, a false pretext concealing someone's real intentions" ([www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O214-stalkinghorse.html](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O214-stalkinghorse.html)).
12. Matthew Campbell, "Muldoon's Remains," 179.
13. For a recent discussion of Muldoon's elaborate rhymes in other poems, see Matthew Campbell, "The Irish Longing for Rhyme," in *After Ireland: Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry*, eds. Jefferson Holdridge and Brian O Conchubhair (Wake Forest University Press, forthcoming 2016). The elaborate rhyme scheme of "1916: The Eoghan Rua Variations" are reminiscent of (though not identical to) that in Muldoon's elegy for Seamus Heaney, "Cuthbert and the Otters," *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 3–12. Campbell has suggested to me that the 14-line stanzas here are shaped like sonnets with the sestet in the middle.
14. "Meadow Pipit," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meadow\\_pipit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meadow_pipit)
15. 175–177. See also <http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0934.pdf#page=3> and following, in which Mary McLoughlin describes carrying messages between Plunkett and MacDonagh.
16. The word "nest" appears in the sixth stanza, but not directly in reference to the meadow pipit: "As a dead horse's belly swells / it pushes a sniper out of his nest."
17. *The Complete Poems of Francis Ledwidge*, 209–210.
18. Bernard O'Donoghue, "Migration," *The Seasons of Cullen Church* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 10. Hugh Haughton pointed out to me that O'Donoghue's poem belongs in this essay. Haughton was also the source of much avian poetic lore, such as the importance of birds for First World War poets: Isaac Rosenberg's "Returning," Edward Thomas's "The Thrush," and his "I Never Saw That Land Before," as well as Michael Longley's homage, "Edward Thomas's War Diary."
19. The bittern also appears in Muldoon's "Boon," *Mules* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1977), 32–33 and in "Yarrow," *The Annals of Chile* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 188, among other poems.
20. "Great Bitterns in Ireland," National Museum of Ireland: [http://www.museum.ie/The-Collections/Documentation-Discoveries/November-2014-\(1\)/Great-Bitterns-in-Ireland](http://www.museum.ie/The-Collections/Documentation-Discoveries/November-2014-(1)/Great-Bitterns-in-Ireland).
21. The paragraphs discussing Mary McLoughlin's undelivered message are taken from Lucy McDiarmid, "Emotions in 1916," *At Home in the Revolution: what women said and did in 1916* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), 175–77.
22. BMH, WS 934 (McLoughlin, Mary), 4.
23. She also remembered it in 1938 when she was interviewed for a military service pension application: IE/MA, MSP 34REF15389 (McLoughlin, Mary), Sworn statement before the Advisory Committee, 4 February 1938, 5.
24. Both quotations are from MacDonagh's translation, which can be found at Poem Hunter <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-yellow-bittern/>.
25. Honor Ó Brolcháin, *Joseph Plunkett* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2012), 398.

## THE SPACE-MINDED DRAMATURGY OF W. B. YEATS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: *AT THE HAWK'S WELL* AND THE DANCE PLAYS

Melinda Szűts

Compared to Yeats's popularity and worldwide recognition as a poet, literary genius and public figure, his achievements as a playwright, dramaturge and theater-maker are still relatively unknown to the broader public. Even though there have been several attempts both in criticism and in the professional and amateur theater scene to bring Yeatsian drama closer to readers and spectators, on a more global scale these plays can never really reach the level of popularity they deserve. Whereas the most valuable critical work by such scholars as James Flannery, Karen Dorn, Katharine Worth, Richard Allen Cave, Masaru Sekine, and more recently Alexandra Poulain, Chris Morash, Shaun Richards, Michael McAteer or Yoko Sato, have all contributed to cultivate and revitalise the discourse on Yeats's plays, the relatively slim number of Yeats productions on the world's stages bear witness to misjudgements of their value as performance texts.

As a native Hungarian, I have never had the opportunity to see a Yeats performance in my home country and was only able to get firsthand experience of Yeats's theater by attending Sam McCready's drama workshop at the Yeats Summer School and watching some of the Sligo-based Blue Raincoat Theatre Company's performances in previous years. If we examine the repertoire of European theaters for the past ten years, we can see quite clearly that Yeats is very rarely staged across the continent, and his work is far from being an integral part of the programmes of Irish theaters either. It could be argued that it is exactly this general lack of interest in Yeatsian drama within the professional theater scene that justifies the plays' often-claimed dramaturgical inadequacies. I would like to suggest that some aspects of Yeatsian drama and stage dramaturgy are still undiscovered, and the professional European theater scene is still lacking the experience of exploring these more covert features. The fact that Yeats has been neglected on most of the world's stages hence is not a *consequence* of the plays' dramaturgical disabilities, but a *cause*—a cause which prevents both theater practitioners and their audience from seeing them in their entirety. Based on my experience directing a Hungarian translation of *At the Hawk's Well*, in addition to performing in three Yeats plays, I believe that one of the reasons behind the relative unpopularity of these stage pieces is a mistaken approach with which we, students, literary critics and creative artists, read and interpret them.

This essay looks at Yeatsian dramaturgy from practical perspective by interpreting his dramas as creations of total theater, through mapping the interrelations of text and extra-textual performance elements.<sup>1</sup> This wider dramaturgical stance requires us to take the performance text as the basis of our scrutiny rather than the strictly defined play text.<sup>2</sup> As for the terminology in the study of Yeats plays, it would generally be much more appropriate to use the term play-text in its extended meaning, which, just like a specific performance text, incorporates all textual and extra-textual performance elements. In my reading, the organic body of the play through which all layers of meaning could be grasped is the composite unity of the spoken word, the three dimensional presence of the actors, movement, sound or music, and space.

In case of such pieces of total theater like Yeats's dance dramas, the written text is inherently incomplete. When we are reading them on paper, the absence of extra-textual elements is obvious and calls for creative interpolations on the interpreters' side. Although it is not required of the literary critic or director to consider and/or follow Yeats's instructions regarding the staging of these texts and fill the above mentioned generic gaps of meaning with the playwright's "original" dramaturgical intentions, my own experience shows that if we read Yeatsian drama thoroughly enough, we cannot really escape doing so.

I believe that in Yeats's plays there is an underlying dramaturgical pattern that is "encoded" in the play texts themselves and can be revealed through textual analysis. This means that even if we consciously try to neglect authorial instructions and concentrate only on the main body of the play text, we will still raise similar questions and probably reach resembling conclusions concerning the extra-textual elements of these stage pieces. The very existence of such an innate, dramaturgical code of course poses serious threats to artistic freedom when it comes to stage adaptation. To see how these underlying, textually induced dramaturgical restrictions affect the process of staging, first I would like to turn to an aspect I consider most important not only among the textual and extra-textual elements of *At the Hawk's Well* and the dance plays but in the whole of Yeats's dramatic oeuvre too, and that is *space*.

### FROM THE "PAINTED STAGE" TO A SPACE-MINDED DRAMATURGY

Andrew Parkin described Yeats's works as being influenced by his "dramatic imagination."<sup>3</sup> We can add to this the idea of a "spatial imagination"; Yeats was always thinking in shapes, forms and movement, not only in his essays and poems but also, and most expressively, in his plays.<sup>4</sup> These spatial relations can give us the key to whole dimensions of meaning, which would otherwise remain hidden. Yeats's plays operate with a space-minded dramaturgy, which is manifested on every possible level of the play text. This space-mindedness is

obviously detectable in the choice of the very subject matter in most of Yeats's plays; it is there in the language of their written text, and it becomes clearly visible in stage movement when the plays are acted out.

The naturalist-realist style of the theater space and its set designs in the Abbey Theatre,<sup>5</sup> which were regarded as the norm by the turn of the century, gradually became insufficient for Yeats mainly because of the restrictions realism required in stage representation. The circumscribed spatial relations of the realist box set (the tradition of frontal staging which separated the audience and the players; the fixed perspective of the stage; the difficulty of visualising location-changes and parallel spatial dimensions because of the application of naturalistic scenery) would have been highly problematic for a symbolist playwright in itself, but they seemed even more inappropriate in an Irish context. Yeats's beliefs about the spirituality of the people, their firm belief in the existence of another, parallel plane of reality and the possibility of transcendence of our earth-bound life made some of the Irish dramatists reluctant to accept the stage space<sup>6</sup> as it is, being totally deprived of the potential for the visual representation of the otherworld. In Irish drama the "evocation of another spatial dimension" thus has always been a central issue both on a textual and a practical level, which generated a tangible misbalance between the presented and the absent realms of dramatic space (the abstract spatial map of the play), as "there would always be more on the stage than could be seen."<sup>7</sup> Yeats believed that the dimensions of the natural and the supernatural can merge in a shared space that is neither domestic, nor distant. His stage-world was a mythical space, uniting the defining features of space and place, accommodating figures of the past—of myth and history—and characters of the present continuous of the theater performance, to create a synthesis of the timed and the timeless, the finite and the eternal.<sup>8</sup>

This idea about the heterogeneity of the dramatic space might relate to or even stem from Yeats's own theory about the "Great Memory" of mankind. He believed "that the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy [...] and that our memories are a part of one great memory."<sup>9</sup> It is this shared, yet individually accessible myth that is given dramatic substance in Yeats's mythical dramatic space, which is called to life through poetry.<sup>10</sup> For Yeats then, the ultimate aim in the theater was to visualise what the realist stage set was not able to show, and he saw the possibility of this "spatial revolution" in making the stage space totally fluid and ambiguous, that is, devoid of any kind of visual restriction.

Throughout the long decades of producing plays on the Abbey stage, Yeats reconsidered his approach to the relationship both of the actors and the scenery, and the space of the playing area and that of the audience to finally reach

the mode of representation that allowed him to stage spatial transcendence. In his early productions Yeats tried to map the possible uses of stage space and scenic design by focusing on the visible elements of the stage space only, but he could not find the way to fully exploit its facilities.<sup>11</sup> He was unable to transcend the limitations of the proscenium stage and thought about the stage-space as unalterably two-dimensional, keeping the painted scenery and its semi-realistic design, trying to accommodate his stage-world to the Pre-Raphaelite imagery that was so popular at the time.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, his endeavours to visualise the otherworld was obvious, which he first attempted by “appealing to the eye” with the exaggerated embellishment of the set design: “I have noticed that the more obviously decorative is the scene and costuming of any play, the more it is lifted out of time and place and the nearer to fairyland we carry it.”<sup>13</sup> In actual fact, these semi-realistic stage sets of the 1890s were very far from the theater space Yeats wanted to create on the Abbey stage, and after several disappointing productions the playwright felt the need for a change in the spatial arrangement of the scenic design and accepted the fact that the representation of the remote, mythical spaces of “faeryland” cannot be made possible by means of colour and decoration.<sup>14</sup> The tableaux of the “painted stage” required stillness or very little movement of the actors, making them mere objects within the overall image of the stage set, which, as Yeats later realised, was a direct consequence of the realist use of the proscenium stage. As Flannery argues: “In the December 1904 edition of *Samhain* he [Yeats] vehemently attacked the development of the proscenium theater in England because it coincided with realism and a proportional ‘decline in dramatic energy.’”<sup>15</sup> “Ever since the last remnant of the old platform disappeared,” Yeats writes in his essay, “The Play, the Player, and the Scene,” “and the proscenium grew into a frame of a picture, the actors have been turned into a picturesque group in the foreground of a meretricious landscape painting.”<sup>16</sup>

Although the gradual move towards a predominantly symbolic representation in Yeats’s stage dramaturgy in the early 1910s fundamentally changed the traditional space relations of the Irish realist stage set of the Abbey, the “Yeatsian revolution” was brought about in its fullest sense by the playwright’s first (indirect) encounters with the Japanese Noh.<sup>17</sup> Following the practices of highly symbolic, non-representational theater, Yeats reconsidered his idea of the stage space, and imagined it as a context where the transition between the different layers of reality would no longer depend on the mobility of the set or the different modifications of the scenic design, but on those signifiers that are most capable of evoking a sense of motion and change in space: words themselves.

The Noh avoided direct, on-stage representation, used very little or almost no scenery, and relied primarily on the imaginative, place-making power of poetry.<sup>18</sup> This is probably the most important trait of this form of Japanese theater, which Yeats incorporated into his own theatrical vision. By almost completely removing the set from the stage space, Yeats could not only solve the problem of “inappropriate” scenic design but could drastically change the means of handling and appropriating space on the stage. As he writes in his notes to the first performance of *At the Hawk's Well* in *Four Play for Dancers*:

It has been a great gain to get rid of scenery, to substitute for a crude landscape painted upon canvas three performers who, sitting before the wall or a patterned screen, describe landscape or event, and accompany movement with drum and gong, or deepen the emotion of the words with zither or flute. Painted scenery after all is unnecessary to my friends and to myself, for our imagination kept living by the arts can imagine a mountain covered with thorn-trees in a drawing-room without any great trouble, and we have many quarrels with even good scene-painting. (*VPI* 415–416)

The visibility of a fixed set could no longer hinder the evocation of a totally flexible and changeable stage world, making it possible to set these new, space-minded plays everywhere (in a small room, on the summit of a hill, on the seashore or in a character's memory—i.e., in a private mind-space) and to make sudden changes in the locations or points of view of the scenes.

Beside creating this unique transformability of the dramatic space, the priority of words in place-making had another important effect on the overall design of these plays: instead of relying on elements of visible scenery, it has now become the task of the actors to create the spatial map of every scene through their movement and stage positions. It is exactly the reason why the priority of words make the dance plays so space-minded, and why extra-textual elements as the placement, proximity and movement of actors gain much greater significance than they would with a visible and definite scenery. Thus, in a theater performance, the prime importance of these extra-textual elements in the formation of the stage space demands a clear and meaningful choreography of stage movement, which, just like in the Japanese Noh, can (or should) become meaningful in itself, even without the words which induce and give context to them.

Closely related to their particular focus on the imaginative power of words, Noh plays had another important feature that left its trace on Yeatsian stage dramaturgy and that can also be regarded as a fundamental trait of a space-minded play-structure. Japanese plays were always highly dependent on the location where their dramatic action took place, as the Japanese regarded the actual place of the narrative one of the most important factors, and oftentimes



the prime mover, of a story. Pronko defines the essence of Noh plays as follows: "The *waki* converses with the *shite* and asks him to relate the tale for which the locale is famous."<sup>19</sup> Yeats felt that the Irish had the same attitude with regard to either domestic or mythical places, and had always been struggling to find the most composite way to stage a play whose substance did not necessarily lie in its plot but in its location. "These Japanese poets," says Yeats in his essay, "Certain Noble Plays of Japan,"

too feel for tomb and wood the emotion, the sense of awe that our Gaelic-speaking countrypeople will sometimes show when you speak to them of Castle Hackett or of some holy well; and that is why perhaps it pleases them to begin so many plays by a traveller asking his way with many questions, a convention agreeable to me, for when I first began to write poetical plays for an Irish theatre I had to put away an ambition of helping to bring again to certain places their old sanctity or romance.<sup>20</sup>

Peter Ure argues that these place-minded plays are the most successful manifestations of Yeats's dramatic visions: "one method of distinguishing his more successful plays from the others is that in them the story is about the place, or, to put it another way, that the characters have to come to just this place, and no other anywhere in the world, so that this story might happen."<sup>21</sup>

With regard to the actual shape, form and size of the stage, the Noh brought drastic changes in Yeats's technical spatial arrangements too. The Japanese handling of stage space was spectacularly different from the major contemporary trends in European stage dramaturgy. To fit the internalised, subjective space evoked by the players—beside the minimalistic scenery (with only a painted tree behind the actors to suggest the eternal, universal nature of the narratives unfolded on stage) and lack of specific sets and props—the Noh employed a three-sided platform stage that enabled the stage space to be opened up and brought closer to the spectators.<sup>22</sup> Breaking with the tradition of composing performances for an exclusively fixed perspective helped Yeats to make much better use of the variety of points of view the different movement patterns could create on the platform stage.

Although Yeats used the Noh form as a powerful source of inspiration to create his own dramaturgical syntax, he had never had the intention to copy Japanese theater: "what Yeats took from the Noh was its fundamental principles of stylization to achieve a union of myth, dream and psychological symbolism," a traditional representational technique he used in his most personal way.<sup>23</sup>

To see how this planned space-mindedness works in practice, I would like to sketch the map of spatial relations in *At the Hawk's Well*, relying both on

its theoretical background and my personal experience while working on this challenging material.

### *AT THE HAWK'S WELL ON THE STAGE*

The first Hungarian production of *At the Hawk's Well* (*A sólyom kútjánál*) came to life as collaboration between actors, musicians, a composer, a dramaturge, a dancer, a choreographer and myself (student of English, drama and theater), and premiered on 30 April 2015, as the closing event of the first conference of the Hungarian Yeats Society in the Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest.<sup>24</sup> After one month of thorough research, translation work, and several interviews with different creative artists, I started a two-month period of rehearsals with a cast of ten (Máté Czakó, choreographer, Young Man; Tamás Varga, Old Man; Eszter Rembeczki, The Guardian of the Well; Adrienn Illés, Aliz Kiss, Gergő Simon, singers; Ákos Lustyik, composer, drums and gong; Barbara Kriesch, harp; Máté Pálhegyi, flute; Júlia Sándor, dramaturge). All performers had experience in the professional theater, and some of them were still students of the Franz Liszt University of Music and the University of Film and Theatre Studies. The fact that these artists came from very different backgrounds (classical musical training for all musicians and singers, physical theater training for the choreographer, jazz dance, classical ballet and oriental dance for the dancer, prose acting training for the Old Man) proved very helpful in creating a synthesis of styles, which we gave a homogeneous form by the end of the rehearsal period. The material, being a piece of total theater composed for all arts, fundamentally required a workshop-like rehearsal process which allowed us to teach and inspire each other. The music and the choreography were motivated by the natural movement of the actors which they brought with themselves as the result of their training; the Hungarian translation was fitted to the music and to the actors' stage movement, and the whole substance of the production was shaped and re-shaped from week to week as we experimented with improvisations and different stylistic approaches.

This long, multi-dimensional process of interpretation firmly justified the need for a space-minded analysis of the written text, as it became obvious after the first couple of meetings that we could only grasp the essence of the play through clarifying and visualising its inherent spatial design. Everyone in the creative team agreed that *At the Hawk's Well* should be interpreted and handled as an extremely formal piece, where the content is substantially transmitted through pattern, rhythm, style and structure, and all its formalities are held together by a well-constructed spatial arrangement. Yet, the most revealing experience was not the fact that we had to pay unusually great attention to stage placement and movement during rehearsals but that we felt we had no total

freedom in planning the composition of these extra-textual elements. After a while it seemed we were not *constructing* the space-map of the performance but rather *reconstructing* it, according to the invisible guidelines Yeats encoded in the play text when he imagined it for stage performance. Here I will only mention a few of those essential questions to which we tried to find possible answers on the basis of these underlying spatial principles.

We agreed with the choreographer at the very first meeting that we would stick to Yeats's idea of the bare stage space. The absence of visualised scenery was extremely important, as the emptiness of the stage space was able to ensure the desired ambiguity of the play's dramatic space. This way, the audience could focus more on the spoken word and the different layers of realities they evoked.

We also adapted the production to the principle of the shared theater space, which, as opposed to the frontal divisions of the box set, carries a multitude of possibilities in establishing different space-relations between the players and the spectators. In a three-dimensional, three-sided or circular arrangement of the playing area the audience is invited to share the stage space (and thus the dramatic space) with the actors, which, paired with the strong alienating effect of the masks and the stylised movement of the players, creates a constant tension of inclusion and exclusion, identification with and detachment from the story and its characters. This impressive physical dialecticism of in and out, and the close presence of the actors, helped create a feeling of a shared ritual, which corresponded with Yeats's original intention to give theater performances back their ritualistic quality.

The open and bare playing area has another great advantage over any kind of fixed set: placement, movement patterns, gestures, and the very rhythm of the performance can gain more attention than they would within a visualised setting in a fixed perspective. This way, the place-making quality of the stage set is given over to the actors themselves. Just like in Noh plays, everything depends on the placement and movement of the players alone, which is always determined by the context the spoken words create for them.

Within this very flexible stage-world, however, the spatial design of places and movement patterns is (or should be) strictly calculated. The text strongly requires visual support for drawing the dramaturgical relation-map of the characters, which can be done by applying the Noh method of assigning fixed places to them. In our production, the Young Man, the Old Man, the Woman of the Sidhe and all three Musicians had their own places within the playing area that were used as spatial references whenever they moved. The whole spatial design of the play was built upon these determined places and on the web of movement patterns that were drawn to connect them. We tried to picture this space-map according to the written material, and thus formulate a strict framework for the play's place-making choreography.

This choreography turned out to be a geometrical one. The Yeatsian geometry of *At the Hawk's Well* is basically symbolic, but as in the theater every form has a very strong place-making quality as well, they can become perfect visual signifiers of the abstract notions they represent. In the text, I found two geometrical forms which were deeply rooted in the play's underlying spatial syntax, and which I believed were essential to use as spatial coordinates in the production. These forms were the circle and the triangle.

I consider the circle the most important symbol here, as in its compound simplicity it can give palpable form to the monotony of the otherwise invisible, imagined setting of the play. The play's location, the well, is a place made timeless by being subject to time: it is "long choked up and dry" with "long stripped" boughs surrounding—a "place" that the "salt sea wind has swept bare" (*VPl* 399). Time adverbials refer to an unchangeable, age-ridden place whose unbreakable bonds to time were tied by the constantly changing elements of "sea" and "wind," the well-known dwelling places of supernatural beings. When time changes—when "night falls" and "the mountain-side grows dark"—it changes cyclically, turning back to itself with its circles drawn by the invisible power that possesses it (*VPl* 400). This timeless constancy of the location's status quo can be effectively underlined by the clear visual image of a circular playing area.

The circle also gives symbolic shape to the futility of the Old Man's life, whose never-ending quest for the water of eternity is also always turning back to itself. In a way, the very theme of this play can also be determined as the personal tragedy of the Old Man, who can never cross the self-induced limitations of his own life-circle. It would be a valid interpretation to consider the whole dramatic space, that is the area of the Hawk's well, to be the personal, subjective mind-space of the Old Man, which, through the circular rendering of the stage space, can be tangibly presented.

It is very trivial, yet still very important from a practical point of view that if we want to emphasise the well's significance in the story and make it an absolute point of reference both symbolically and visually, then we should place it to a most "weighty" position within the playing area, for example at the center of the stage space. In agreement with my creative team, we did not really want anything else than to make this point absolutely clear for our audience: this story describes the slowly changing personal relations of characters with the well itself. Both the Old Man and the Young Man want to get closer and closer to the core to occupy it and make it solely their own. If we keep the governing idea of the circular arrangement of the stage space, all lines of force will point towards the center, making every step inwards a symbolic attempt to gain authority over the Well.

This simple but effective spatial design not only helps the audience understand the basic structure of the story and the motivation of characters better,

but also makes the visual similarity between the well and the playing space more obvious. As all of Yeats's dance plays and most of his other stage pieces, this particular story is also fundamentally *about* its location, which means that if we formulate a stage design which resembles the usual circular shape of a well, we immediately highlight the latter's metaphoric and symbolic significance.

The other geometrical form that we used as a general compositional pattern in the production's spatial setting was the triangle. The triangle is a recurring form in all of Yeats's dance plays, both on textual and extra-textual levels. The relationships of characters are often rendered in triangles.<sup>25</sup> The numbers of players on the stage are also uneven in most plays, so it is hard (and also unwise) to neglect this very overt spatial topos in their stage placement.

The most obvious manifestation of the Yeatsian threefold division is in the cloth-folding ritual, which opens the dance plays and remains an important compositional element in later stage pieces as well. According to Yeats's instructions, the three Musicians form a triangle "with the First Musician at the apex supporting the centre of the cloth," which they slowly unfold while they sing the lines of the opening chorus (*VPI* 399). I felt that in stage production this cloth-folding ritual is one of those elements that might be substituted with any other activity that serves the purpose of initiating the main story of the play. It has no other function than to be a ritual—a ritual which does exactly the opposite of what the shared space of the open playing area aims at: it defines and locates the dramatic space where the story of the play unfolds.

The opening ritual makes it clear that despite the proximity and the inclusion of the spectators into the world of the play, the circular playing area *becomes* much more than an allocated bare space which the audience has access to. The word "becomes" is of prime importance here, as it is the opening ritual that evokes this initial spatio-temporal change: the dramatic space of the ordinary empty stage gathers new shape according to the poetic description of the Musicians. This ritual and the very presence of the Musicians, similarly to the use of masks, is a means of alienation, which aims at distancing the spectators from the inner story of the play. However, without this frame of the abstract meta-characters the performance would lose its most challenging quality of being inclusive and exclusive at the same time. It is the mediation of the Musicians that gives Yeats's play the compositional duality that enables it to become a shared ritual *and* a distanced narrative.

Despite the fact that I believed the actual choreography of the opening ritual was not of prime importance regarding the play's overall interpretation, I realised that keeping the triangular cloth-folding pattern would help the general understanding of the complicated structure of multiple realities within which this play worked. Just as I assigned a single geometrical form to the well, to the main plot and to the two masked players (the circle), I also attributed one

to the abstract meta-characters. The triangle was an obvious choice because of the number of the Musicians, and although the geometrical form was already implied in the original choreography of the cloth-folding ritual, we made it even more obvious in our production.



**Figure 1. The musicians perform the cloth-folding ritual.**

*Photo credit: Alan Place/FusionShooters*

We kept the cloth and cut it to a triangular shape, and used its measurements as spatial boundaries throughout the play to define the parameters of the Musicians' stage movement.<sup>26</sup> With this spatial restriction I had two intentions. First, I wanted to make it absolutely clear that the Musicians are on a different layer of reality than the players, and that they do not share the audience's spatio-temporal domain either. They are neither here nor there; they are the abstract yet anthropomorphic representations of liminality itself. They cannot move freely within the playing area as if they were ordinary members of the audience, but they cannot follow the circular pattern of the players either, as they can never enter the world of the dramatic action. I wanted them to become mirrors: spatial and temporal mediators who narrate and comment on the happenings within the dramatic space, who give voice to the feelings and otherwise unexpressed reactions of the players and the audience, and who are generally responsible for determining the point of view from which the whole action is presented. This triangular rendering of their movement positioned them in a separate layer of reality and also created an exciting contrast with the circle and the cyclical movement of the masked players. I also felt that this dialecticism of the circle and the triangle could become a very effective visual match on the stage, as these two forms inherently carried antithetical dramatic energies.



Yet, it was not only the contrast of these forms, and of the different layers of reality which they stood for, which convinced me to use the triangular cloth as the only prop. I did not only want to separate the Musicians from the players but also to suggest some kind of a connection between them. The cloth, which the Musicians unfolded in the opening ritual, remained within the playing space as the cloak of the Woman of the Sidhe with which she covered herself throughout the play. Thus, the triangle as a compositional pattern not only surfaced in the movement of the Musicians but also in the costume of the Guardian of the Well.



**Figure 2. The cloth as the cloak of the Guardian of the Well. Rehearsal picture.**

*Photo credit: Melinda Szűts*

It was relatively easy to see how characters should be moved on stage in order to match their initial and later positions within the play's dramaturgical structure. This clarity of possible representation stems from the fact that in all of Yeats's dance plays the space-minded dramaturgy works on a textual level as well. His characters and their initial position in the dramas' relation-map are described with spatial references, which mean that they are defined according to their relationship with the location where the dramatic action takes place.<sup>27</sup> *At the Hawk's Well* is a perfect example for this: The Young Man is described as somebody who "has an ancient house beyond the sea" (*VPl* 403), which defines his position as an outsider, a real intruder to the place of the well. Contrarily, the Old Man is introduced as someone who must be "native" to the well, "for



that rough tongue / Matches the barbarous spot" (VPl 404), and as he "has been watching by his well / These fifty years" (VPl 401). He has become an organic part of the place—which he rightfully defends and claims as his own. The slowly evolving conflict between these two characters builds upon and revolves around the question of authority over the spatial center of the action.

There is no real conflict in the play until these spatial relations are disturbed. It is only when the Young Man decides to stay at the desolate place of the Sidhe that his old counterpart sets the action in motion: "No! Go from this accursed place! This place / Belongs to me, that girl there, and those others, / Deceivers of men" (VPl 405). After his place has been occupied he turns against the Young man quite openly. He desperately wants the other to "leave the well" to him, "for it belongs / To all that's old and withered" (VPl 406).

The second most important dramatic change comes about when the Guardian is forced to give up her place, the well, to let the intruder occupy it. "Do what you will," says the Young Man, "I shall not leave this place / Till I have grown immortal like yourself" (VPl 409). This is the very move that forces the Guardian to start her dance, which will eventually determine Cuchulain's fate.

In our production we tried to highlight the significance of these place-changes by making use of the fixed places of the three characters. The rhythm of the action had to be rendered in a way that when the Young Man uttered the sentence "I will stand here and wait" (VPl 405), he was stepping into the place of the Old Man, making the act of occupation clear by visual means as well. In the circular playing space this meant that the Young Man got one step closer to the center. He remained there ("No, I stay" [VPl 406]) until the first cry of the Hawk called his attention to the well and made him move slowly towards it. We tried to design these stations of stage movement clear enough for the audience to let them *see* how the relationship of the two masked players changed towards the Hawk-Woman and the well itself. The formation of these stations also gave nicely shaped triangles within the big circle of the stage space, which made the overall geometry of the performance even more obvious. In the final place-change of the Young Man he stepped into the very core of the playing area, letting the Guardian free from her place-bound stillness in which she had crouched during the first part of the play. After breaking up the strict geometry of the series of place-changes, the playing space was rearranged according to another kind of choreography: the dance of the Hawk-Woman.

The limitation the underlying spatial code imposes upon most parts of any performance of this play doesn't mean of course that every move and every turn of the head is encoded in the dance plays' texts. There are always variable elements, less in *At the Hawk's Well* than in the later dance plays. There is one element in the dance plays' space dramaturgy that is completely free, and that is the dance itself. Yeats could not possibly have encoded any kind of spatial

reference into the dance part, as he himself was not really sure what he wanted to see on the stage. His collaborations with different choreographers resulted in a variety of performance texts, depending on the individual interpretations of the creative artist Yeats worked with.<sup>28</sup> As there are no textual guidelines and no overt spatial signifiers in the written material in the dance sections, it has always been and will always be the task, or rather the challenge, of the choreographer to break with or keep the geometry of Yeats's space-compositions, and to imagine these free scenes according to his or her own vision.



**Figure 3.** Scene from the final dance of the Hawk-Woman.

*Photo credit: Alan Place/FusionShooters*

Our performance tried to make use of this particular freedom of the dance section. We wanted to emphasise the contrast between the strictly drawn movement patterns of the masked players, which were composed for the space-bound rhythm of the first part of the play, and the released power of the Woman of the Sidhe in the final dance. After the unbound freedom of the dance sequence, we again returned to the visual concept of the players' urge to occupy the center of the stage, but this time it was only the Old Man who remained focused on the geometrical midpoint. When he could finally reach it, it was totally empty. The Guardian of the Well, and with her the hope of drinking from the miraculous

water, has already left the playing space, leaving only the Old Man behind. The performance was concluded with the re-enactment of the cloth-folding ritual in a reversed choreography. The imagined dramatic space of the Hawk's Well was turned back to the empty space shared by the players, the Musicians and the audience.

I do not say that the way we approached Yeats's dance play in this particular production is the only possible path creative artists or readers can tread when it comes to staging or any other means of interpretation. What I do suggest is that both literary critics and theater practitioners should remember that these pieces were composed for the stage and imagined for visual presentation. If we—readers, interpreters or creative artists—want to discover these stage materials in their full complexity and appreciate Yeats's genius as a dramaturge, we should put the plays on stage and let their essence be unfolded in real time and space. Whenever we feel the need for some advice where to begin and how to proceed—space is a good place to start.

### Notes

1. I use this term to describe Yeats's intention to create a composite unity of many forms of artistic expression in his theater performances. Here I follow Katharine Worth's line of thought, where she describes Yeatsian theater as follows: "Yeats's evolution of a modern technique of total theatre and his use of it to construct a 'drama of the interior' makes him one of the great masters of twentieth-century theatre"; see Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 1.
2. Described as "The relationship of all the signifying systems used in a performance, whose arrangement and interaction constitute the mise-en-scene. The notion of performance text is therefore an abstract and theoretical one, not an empirical and practical one. It considers the performance as a scale model in which the production of meaning may be observed"; see Patrice Pavis and Christine Shantz, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 261.
3. Andrew Parkin, *The Dramatic Imagination of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Gill and Macmillan, 1978).
4. I agree with Morash and Richards who claim that Yeats was an innovator in his use of theater space and that the "Yeatsian revolution" of space dramaturgy influenced later dramatists and theater practitioners of the Irish theater scene; Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 63.
5. Typical realist-naturalist representations of Irish kitchen sets designed for the proscenium stage include Lady Gregory's *Twenty-Five* in 1903 and Yeats and Gregory's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1904; see Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Abbey Theatre* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 23, 25.
6. I differentiate between theater space, stage space and dramatic space. I use the term dramatic space to describe the abstract, imagined setting of the dramatic action that is visualised in the reader's mind's eye, according to the play's written material. The theater space is the concrete, specified location (the theater building, the concert hall, the market place etc.), where the dramatic action of the play is set and designed. The stage space is part of the

theater space. It accommodates the actual, visualised setting the director creates on the basis of his or her interpretation of the dramatic space. The dramatic space and the stage space thus have a referential relationship: the latter is created on the basis of the former, as a result of directorial decisions. It is important to mention that theater space and stage space cannot always be clearly distinguished from each other, as some theater traditions deliberately try merge the dividing lines between actors and spectators, creating a shared, collective space for the action.

7. Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 20.
8. For a more elaborate analysis of the workings of Yeatsian space dramaturgy see Worth's chapter on Yeats's "spatial syntax" in *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 48–71.
9. W. B. Yeats, "Magic" in *E&I*, 28.
10. Following the same line of thought, in his seminal work on the ontology and the spatial composition of the poetic image, Gaston Bachelard defines poetry as a "shelter for dreams," a mythical space through which the past can be revealed: "there exists for each one of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past [...] and that these dream values communicate poetically from soul to soul." Similarly to Yeats, he considers words mediators that can open up worlds inside and outside us: "all important words, all the words marked for grandeur by a poet, are keys to the universe, to the dual universe of the Cosmos and the depths of the human spirit"; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 17, 198.
11. This and the following paragraph are based on Karen Dorn's book on Yeats's experiments as a theater practitioner, his development in representation techniques and his collaborations with Edward Gordon Craig; Karen Dorn, *Players and the Painted Stage* (Sussex: Harvester, 1984).
12. According to Loizeaux, Yeats associated his early stage pictures with the works he admired, as he saw Pre-Raphaelite paintings as "frozen moments of drama," and sometimes worked from favourite paintings when writing plays. He thus claimed that the "art of the stage is the art of making a succession of pictures" and suggested that in stage productions "we should be content to suggest a scene upon a canvas, whose vertical flatness we accept and use, as the decorator of pottery accepts the roundness of a bowl or a jug." Quoted in Elizabeth Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts* (New York: Syracuse, 2003) 89, 91.
13. *Ibid.* 93.
14. The over-decorated costumes designed by Miss Horniman for Yeats's *The King's Threshold* (1903) were described by Lennox Robinson as "ugly dresses," with which Yeats himself was not at all satisfied; Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Abbey Theatre* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 24.
15. James Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* (New Haven: Yale, 1976), 257.
16. *Ex*, 177.
17. For a more elaborate analysis on the relationship between Japanese Noh theater and Yeats's dance plays, focusing particularly on *At the Hawk's Well* and its possible Japanese sources see: Yoko Sato, "At the Hawk's Well': Yeats's Dramatic Art of Visions," *Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 24 (2009), 27–36.
18. Here I rely on Győző Duró's essay "Színház az örökkévalóságnak" (Theater for Eternity) in: Tamacu Kokubu, *A japán színház* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984), 89.
19. Leonard C. Pronko, *Theater East and West: Perspectives Toward a Total Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 76.
20. *E&I*, 232.
21. Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright* (London: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 29.

22. Masaru Sekine and Christopher Murray, *Yeats and the Noh* (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1990), 73–84. Tamacu Kokubu, *A japán színház* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984) 23–24.
23. Richard Allen Cave in his Introduction to the *Selected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, (London: Penguin, 1997), xxviii.
24. The production was later invited to be performed at the conference of the International Yeats Society in Limerick (15–17 October 2015) in Hungarian language, with a reading of the original play in English beforehand.
25. The most obvious example is *The Dreaming of the Bones*, where the Young Man, the Stranger and the Young Girl form the first, the three Musicians the second relationship-triangle. The power relations in former are constantly changing during the play, as the dialogues render the three characters in 2+1 contact-sequences (Stranger and Young Man talking, Young Girl silently following them; Young Girl and Young Man talking, Stranger silently leading etc.). This threefold division of characters is obvious in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (Ghost/Figure of Cuchulain, Emer, Eithne Inguba, Fand) and in *Calvary* (Christ, Lazarus, Judas; three Roman Soldiers) too.
26. See Figure 1: The Musicians perform the cloth-folding ritual. *At the Hawk's Well* (*A sólyom kútjánál*), Irish Academy of Music and Dance, Limerick, 15 October 2015. Director: Melinda Szűts.
27. There is a multitude of examples for this space-minded description of characters in the other dance plays as well. To pick just one: in the *Dreaming of the Bones* the Young Man is defined as somebody who “was in the Post Office”—meaning that he has taken part in the Easter Rising, whereas the Ghosts whom he meets during the night are described as lingering souls who “have not come from the Abbey graveyard.” Again, characters’ power relations are defined by their spatial attributes: the ghosts are in a superior dramaturgical position, because they are familiar with the location: they “know the pathways where the sheep tread out and all the hiding places of the hills,” whereas the Young Man would “break his neck” if he were left alone in the dark. Ibid. 127–130.
28. For detailed descriptions of Yeats’s collaborations see Mary Fleischer, *Embodied Texts: Symbolist Playwright-Dancer Collaborations* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) and Richard Allen Cave, *Collaborations: Ninette de Valois and William Butler Yeats* (Alton: Dance Books, 2011).

## A REVIEW OF *AT THE HAWK'S WELL* (A *SÓLYAM KÚTJÁNÁL*)

*At the Hawk's Well* (A *sólyam kútjánál*), live theatrical production, Theatre One, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, Limerick University, 15 October 2015.

*Reviewed by Matthew M. DeForrest*

At this point in my career, it is an unusual thing to find myself alienated from William Butler Yeats's work—especially a work that I have studied somewhat carefully in the past. It is all the more shocking to discover it happening immediately after hearing it read aloud. And yet, that is precisely what happened not only to myself, but to most of the non-Hungarian speaking audience of *At the Hawk's Well* (A *sólyam kútjánál*) on the night of Thursday, 15 October in Theatre One of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at Limerick University during the inaugural Conference of the International Yeats Society.

I had been surprised by the performance of a Yeats play before. I still vividly recall how, in February 1996, the Contemporary Theater's staging of *Purgatory* startled me because the power dynamic between the Old Man and his son, the Boy, was the reverse of how I had read it. I had always seen the physicality of the Boy, stressed so often in the play, as a path by which he had begun to dominate his aging father—the moment of the interchange of the gyres having passed and the son overshadowing his father. In their performance, however, it was the Boy who was timid and dominated by the intensity of his father's will despite his struggles against it. And yet, this interpretation of the characters, enlightening to me though it was, did not alienate me from the text, which remained familiar in a way the Hungarian Yeats Society's production was not.

For those who were not there, the performance began, as we sometimes forget, just outside the theater doors with the audience's anticipation what was to come. In this particular case, the audience consisted of Istvan S. Pálffy, the Hungarian Ambassador to Ireland; Susan O'Keeffe, Senator of the Irish Republic; Professor Michael Gilsenan, who was to be honored by the Glucksman Library of the University of Limerick the next day; other assorted dignitaries; and an impressive assembly of new and noted Yeats scholars. As such, the players could count on a receptive, if initially hesitant, audience. The program had made it clear we would be seeing *At the Hawk's Well* performed in Hungarian. A handful of those in attendance had heard Professor Margaret Mills Harper describe how impressed she had been by the performance, which she had seen in Hungary in May, and how excited she was to have the players perform it as a part of the conference. So, there was no question raised as to the quality of



the performance to come. There was, nevertheless, the usual trepidation that comes from any encounter with the unknown—only partially mitigated by the news that there would be a reading of the play offered in English prior to the performance so that the audience would have Yeats's language and the play's story fresh in their memories. How, after all, were we to appreciate the action of the play without Yeats's words?

After the doors opened, the first in were seated in the round on the stage floor—with the dignitaries further back, sitting in stadium-style seating. Professor Harper and Ambassador Palfy offered appropriately warm and dignified greetings conveying an excitement that they felt for what we would soon experience. They, of course, knew what was coming.

The stage reading immediately followed. The four readers entered and took up places on the floor equidistant from one another and paced out a circle. The reading was international, with Hungarian (Melinda Szüts reading the stage directions), French (Alexandra Poulain reading the part of the Singers), and Irish (Matthew Campbell reading the part of the Old Man and Dan Mortell reading the part of the Young Man) voices delivering the lines from different editions of the text in hand: a larger edition and pocket edition in softcover, a photocopy, and an electronic version read from a mobile phone. The difference in the format struck me at the time, as it spoke to something that die-hard champions of the physical book sometimes overlook. It is the story transmitted, and not the format of its transmission, that keeps us coming back to tales like the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and makes us excited when twenty missing lines of *Gilgamesh* are re-discovered, even when they are written in the foreign script of a dead language on crumbling clay tablets that we will likely never see, let alone be able to read. The magic of its translated transmission across time, regardless of the medium it inhabits, is enough for us.

While I considered this, the readers made their way around their circle—a staging that captured something of the play's ritual elements. The reading had all the power one would expect Yeats's lines to offer when delivered by those who are not only intimately familiar with them but clearly take great joy from them.

Following this reading, the six players entered in silence along with the musicians (not to be confused with the Three Musicians of the cast) Réka Nemes, Barbara Kriesch, and Ákos Lystyik, whose accompaniment on the flute, harp, and drums, respectively, would subtly but powerfully color the performance. The Three Musicians of the play, portrayed by Blanka Bede, Adrienn Illés, and Gergő Simon, were dressed all in black and their faces made up in clown white with black triangles pointing in different directions. Szüts later explained to me that the triangles pointed at one of the organs of sense on the face—one that was initially developed by the individual player, who then passed the movement from one to the next around the circle they made.<sup>1</sup> The large cloth was



opened and, after the opening lines were chanted, draped over the Guardian of the Well, portrayed by Eszter Rembeczki, where it then simultaneously became an enveloping cloak and bird's wings. At the center of the stage, a small silver-grey triangle of cloth marked the well.

The arrangement and movement of the players and the movement of the three named characters, as Szüts explained during her presentation later in the conference, were based on circles and triangles—an arrangement she finds omnipresent in Yeats's construction for his plays for dancers and which she believes was captured by Csaba Valdar in the image used on the play's poster.<sup>2</sup> The two triads of the play (the Three Musicians and the triumvirate of the Old Man, Young Man, and Guardian of the Well) circled the central well, investing in it a more solid sense of place than the cloth triangle could have carried on its own.

Szüts's staging of the play, however, did not exclusively focus on the cast as they moved around the plane of the stage. She concerned herself with three dimensional placement and its significance for the characters. The Old Man, portrayed by Tamás Varga, remained continuously grounded in his movements. His feet and, at times, his full body, were pulled down by the stage floor by an oppressive gravity. In contrast, the Young Man, portrayed by Mate Czako, who also choreographed the dances, was continuously vertical—always preparing to leap upward with bird-like movements that shifted from one pose to another—as if he were continuously practicing the forms of a martial art. This upward movement, Czako later explained to me, was designed to bridge the worlds of the Old Man and the Guardian of the Well.<sup>3</sup> The Guardian's movements alone were fluid and free—at least when the action of the play allowed her to move. Initially, she was still upon the stage, waiting for the moment of revelation. As it approached, however, she explosively shifted from one held pose to another until she was finally free, stood, and stalked about the stage in the prelude to her dance.

It was at this moment that the players—importantly—shifted their styles of movement in a manner akin to the way the musicians had passed their face-based movements around their circle. The Old Man, overwhelmed by the stress of the Guardian's regard, swooned into the immobility that had held the Guardian in place moments before. The Young Man, undeterred by the Guardian, attempted to ground himself as the Old Man did, ignoring the Guardian and watching the well. The Guardian, having begun to dance, became increasingly bird-like in her movements as her dance drew the Young Man back up from his grounded state. His jerky, marionette-like response to her dance conveyed his failed attempt to resist the Guardian's building power. However, the Young Man was overwhelmed by the Guardian, who drew him into her plane as if he was held by invisible strings; there, he was subjected to an entranced dance, a state that he would be unable to sustain—an ironic fate, given his quest for

immortality. Once she drew him from the stage floor, she indifferently dropped him back into the mundane world, where he would search for the prosaic hawk that led him to the well.

It is worth pausing to note here that the Young Man's movements at this point in the dance was the only moment in Szüts's staging where the action conformed to Yeats's stage directions as he describes the entrance of the Old Man: "His movements, like those of the other persons of the play, suggest a marionette" (*CPI* 210). By breaking from this aspect of the stylized movement for the dancers, Szüts highlighted the control being exerted over the Young Man by the Guardian and hinted at the Guardian's role as (to mortal eyes) a cruel Otherworld puppet master—foiling the Old Man's desires for the water and re-directing the Young Man away from her well. Likewise, it stressed her inhuman impartiality. The Guardian doesn't just leave those who do not seek her well unmolested; she ignores them as things of supreme indifference. Only those who might yet drink become the focus of her attention, as was seen when she focused on the Old Man just long enough to drive him to the floor. Following that, her focus remained on the Young Man until he was driven from the stage.

As the Guardian returned to her place on the stage following her dance, the Old Man stirred to life and dragged himself, like a wounded animal, to the brink of the well. Although the words torn from him at the discovery of the wetted stones were in Hungarian, there was no mistaking their emotional import. Absent were the measured, oracular tones of the earlier stage reading and of other performances I had seen. Varga, as directed by Szüts, captured the heart-wrenching despair of one who had been cheated of his life's meaning and ultimate goal and his knowledge that he would have no other chances to achieve either. The pain of this made the attempt to reach out to the Young Man as he heard the call to battle—"O do not go! The mountain is accursed; / Stay with me, I have nothing more to lose, / I do not now deceive you." (*CPI* 218)—all the more powerful, even when it was spoken in a language whose words were opaque.

That the performance was wholly in Hungarian meant that I had to concentrate on the movement, expression, and action of the players—but not their (or Yeats's) words. As a result, I experienced a much different performance than I did in Sligo when, in the early 1990s, I first saw *At the Hawks Well* performed in a black box lit to the level of deepest twilight. This is not to say that the actors and actresses of the performance in Sligo were any less than capable, comfortable, or confident. It has everything to do with my role as a member of the audience. Being fully divorced from the language meant that I was less focused on the magic of Yeats's words and was more fully present to the actions of the players and what their tone and movements conveyed.

In this sense, *At the Hawk's Well* (*A sólyam kútjánál*) made crystal clear to me something I should have been more consciously aware of as I entered the theater. It is the story or, in the case, the play that is the thing and not its text. By fully alienating me from the words, I was not just exposed to the physicality of the story. I witnessed the incarnation of Yeats's desire to incorporate multiple forms of art into a whole, as can be read in his work, such as in *A Vision* (1925) where the Judwalis sect dance the geometries of the system on the sand, and as in his plays for dancers.

All this makes abundantly clear how enlightening a well-researched, well-staged performance like this can be. I learned as much, if not more, about *At the Hawk's Well* from this performance than I have from scholarly monographs and my own reading of the play—although I suspect explaining how I was granted a deeper awareness of the play's meaning would elude me. In brief, the performance—like all good performances—made manifest Yeats's assessment of higher levels of knowledge: "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it."<sup>4</sup>

### Notes

1. Melinda Szüts. Personal Conversation. Parteen, Co. Clare, Ireland. 15 October 2015.
2. Melinda Szüts. "The Space Minded Dramaturgy of *At the Hawk's Well*—Theory vs. Practice." "A Writer Young and Old: Yeats at 150": The Inaugural Conference of the International Yeats Society, Limerick University, Limerick, Ireland. 17 October 2015.
3. Czako, Mate. Personal Conversation. Parteen, Co. Clare, Ireland. 15 October 2015.
4. WBY to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, 4 January [1939], *CL InteLex* #7362.

## MINISTERS OF THE IMAGINATION

*European Voices in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Geoffrey Hill* (bilingual edition), ed. Ineke Bockting, Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec, Elizabeth Muller (Peter Lang, 2015), pp. vii+172

*Reviewed by Francis Hutton-Williams*

“**T**he greatest living poet in the English language” was the official verdict most often repeated in connection with Geoffrey Hill, until his recent death at the end of June 2016. Not since W. B. Yeats, whose name serves as a pillar for both the British and Irish literary establishments, had a living poet received so much canonical attention. A refusal to compromise on difficulty, an immovable disdain for much that passes as modern poetry, and an obsession with national politics and statesmanship have helped to cement both Yeats and Hill’s position as writers of exemplary status across much of the English-speaking world. Hundreds of books and articles have been written on the significance of their literary achievements within the contexts of Anglophone literatures of empire and anti-empire, twentieth-century verse and European modernism. Yet the ways in which these two major poets echo, overlap and interact with one another has attracted far less joint consideration. Peter McDonald’s *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill* (2002) is one of the few book-length studies centred on the common force of their poetry’s social, intellectual and ethical commitments.

The main purpose of *European Voices in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Geoffrey Hill*, which is derived from an international conference on Yeats and Hill that took place in 2013 at the Catholic University of Paris, is to “take up” the “slack” of “the Yeats-Hill connection” (6). *Classical Voices in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Geoffrey Hill* may have been a more accurate title for the collection. Half of the eight essays that feature in the book discuss Yeats and Hill’s engagements with leading poets and dramatists of ancient Greece. The collection approaches the vitality of that inheritance from several angles: from renditions of the Orpheus myth to cryptic modes of address based on the structures of Pindaric odes. Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec’s essay, the longest in the volume, entitled “Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Péguy, Hill” (91–121), provides an account of each poet’s “debts to writers of antiquity” (93).

The “haunting perception” that provides the “background” to Kilgore-Caradec’s essay (and also to the introduction, which comments just as fatalistically on the destruction of the classics curriculum in France), is that, “because even a basic knowledge of classical culture has all but disappeared [...] the majority of English speakers may be only several generations away

from a total loss of the ability to read and interpret modernist texts" (93–94). Kilgore-Caradec contrasts this crisis in classical learning with the pedagogical climate in which Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Hill honed and practiced their craft, arguing that an "essential culture" of classical literature "pervades their works" (93). However, it does not necessarily follow from this observation that a formal training in classical literature is essential for reading and interpreting modernist texts. This claim needs to be treated more cautiously and is not as self-reflexive as it might be when considering the poets under discussion. As Jean-Baptiste Picy's essay, entitled "Approaching Dionysus: Yeats and Pater's Instinctive Differences" (31–43), demonstrates, Yeats's learning in the classics was primarily self-directed despite his Victorian schooling, less extensive than that of many of his modernist contemporaries, and more heavily mediated by his engagement with the English Romantics and the Aesthetic Movement. As Picy contends: "Even his exact mode and degree of acquaintance with scholarly works and contemporary theories of Greek culture—such as that propounded by Nietzsche's 1872 *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*—remains open to question" (32). It is worth exercising a similar degree of caution when predicting the inadequacies of future readers, who will have better access to archival materials than their predecessors even if they are unlikely to match the classical learning of the gentleman classes of the late nineteenth century. One might also offset the priority of the classical curriculum that Kilgore-Caradec insists upon for reading modernist texts with other precedents, such as Dante and the medieval Italian philosophical poets, which are surely just as vital to a critic's arsenal when approaching the poetry of Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Hill.

The editorial principles behind the collection are unclear.<sup>1</sup> None of the contributions is numbered as chapters, and there is little sign of an effort to group the essays according to chronology, methodology or theme. As the only essay to address Yeats and Hill in equal measure, McDonald's paper is pivotal for conjoining the essays in the first half of the collection (on Yeats) with the second half (on Hill). However, the placement of Colbert Kearney's essay after McDonald's returns the focus back to Yeats, which breaks up the continuity that Kilgore-Caradec's essay purports to express with McDonald's (113). More problematic from the perspective of the classical framework that Kilgore-Caradec imposes upon the collection is the fact that neither McDonald nor Kearney's essays, which form the centrepiece to the volume, read Yeats or Hill's work in terms of its affinity with classical tradition. Indeed, Kearney's essay actively contradicts this emphasis.

When discussing the prophetic intensity of Yeats's verse, Kearney notes that "we should recognise an element of irony in the scholarly urge to 'fix' or contextualise Yeats in his time" (73). The italicisation of deictic indicators—"Back then," "Today" (78)—that recur throughout "Yeats in Time to Be" (71–90) serves

as a playful reminder to the reactionary imagination that poems by Yeats do not belong to a previous age and should be actively reinterpreted outside the framework of linear periodisation. Alternatively, Kearney looks forward to the development of new reading cultures that, growing out of the social and cultural challenges of our own epoch (market instability, climate change, terrorism, migration, artificial intelligence, cyberspace), will transform our understanding of these poems in ways that neither the generation of 1916 nor we can predict. Arguing for a “revisionary reading” of Yeats “through the filter of our own circumstances” (81), Kearney harnesses “the living energy” in Yeats’s verse to present and future needs, releasing the animate and disruptive potential of several poems through close and engaging readings of “To Ireland in the Coming Times” (1892), “September 1913” (1913), “The Magi” (1913) and “Easter, 1916” (1916). Kearney’s reading of Yeats’s poetry against the grain of traditional historicism enlists contemporary reading cultures to highlight the full force (and insolence) of Yeats’s visionary beliefs, which the unapologetic senator was never afraid to voice over and above his contemporaries. A case in point is the plural in the title of Yeats’s poem “To Ireland in the Coming *Times*” which, Kearney suggests, means that “Yeats is not speaking to any particular generation to follow” (75), but to *all* future generations that will have the chance to consider his work. The boldness of Yeats’s ambitions extends to his playful syncretism which, though the poet’s interest in *prisca theologia* and intellectualised pagan thought goes unremarked in Kearney’s essay, is examined by Elizabeth Muller in relation to the eighth part of the 1932 poem, “Vacillation” (25–7), and by Kilgore-Caradec in relation to the values and meanings of the image of the rose (93–105).

Once the classical framework that Kilgore-Caradec imposes upon the collection is left to one side, the significance of other individual contributions comes into focus. The first essay in the collection, Elizabeth Muller’s “‘Unity of Being’: Dantean Echoes in Yeats’s Aesthetics” (11–29), makes intricate use of Yeats’s *Autobiographies* (1927) and Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* (1295) to establish a direct link between the visionary intensities of both poets and their unrequited loves. Muller argues that self-overcoming in artistic creation was not only “a pre-requisite for great art” in Dante’s time but demanded a “fusion” between the life of the artist and his or her work that Yeats “tried to emulate and reproduce in Ireland in a prodigious effort to turn back the clock” (12). What Yeats sought to recreate in the Ireland in which he lived was, according to Muller, nothing less than the absolute unity between man and the cosmos that Dante had inherited during the Florentine Duecento: the “fully integrated, classical civilization in which no artist could be free from or greater than his times” (24). Muller’s eloquently argued and detailed essay reveals just how important Dante’s assortments—or *saturae*—of philosophy, poetry and autobiography,

such as those arranged in the *Convivio*, were to the construction and pursuit of Yeats's aesthetic ambitions as a fellow poet, mystic and auto-biographer.

Peter McDonald interviewed Geoffrey Hill at length about W. B. Yeats (at his own, not Hill's suggestion) while Hill was Professor of Poetry at Oxford. His essay in this collection, entitled "Gaiety and Dread: Late Yeats and Hill" (55–69), considers the ways in which both poets experiment with paradoxical inflections of genre and feeling. With examples from Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" (1938) and Hill's *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) and *Scenes from Comus* (2005), McDonald demonstrates how much dramatic information is left out of these *poèmes de la maturité* and allowed to remain behind the scenes. For two poets so experienced in their craft, McDonald shows how even a passing dedication may change the entire theatrical shape of the poem as a visible expression, or mock expression, of gratitude. In such a gesture, McDonald argues, may lie the difference between a powerful transfiguring of lived physical emotion ("gaiety") and ironic self-transfiguration ("dread").

Peter Behrman de Sinéty's essay confines itself to a single Hill poem. The poem, entitled "In Memoriam: Ernst Barlach" (2007), alludes to Barlach's First World War memorial sculpture, the *Mater Dolorosa* (1921), which was destroyed by the Nazis during the Second World War. De Sinéty bases his analysis of this poem on a passage from one of Hill's critical writings, "Language, Suffering and Silence" (1999), to identify a powerful correspondence, or ekphrastic tension, between the poem's *technē* (the difficulty it enacts of "working in" allusive materials) and the sculpture's carved inscription and appearance (158–160). Difficulty, ambiguity and plain speaking are understood to be constitutive both of the verse construction and of the sculpture's ethical meaning—a meaning that in "Language, Suffering and Silence" Hill calls "the abrupt, unlooked-for semantic recognition" that precedes "an act of mercy or grace."<sup>2</sup>

The conference from which these papers are derived was held to mark the 140th anniversary of the birth of Charles Péguy. But despite his shared interest with Yeats in nationalism, mysticism and peasant culture, Péguy barely finds his way into *European Voices*. He receives only passing mention in Kilgore-Caradec's essay (105–8) and in a four-page condensed conversation between Hill and Kenneth Haynes, the editor of the canonical editions of Hill's works (165–8). Haynes's transcript of that conversation describes the genesis of Hill's book-length poem, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983), as a version of one of the English poet's *saints innocents*, inspired "in a direct way" from the last line of C. H. Sisson's 1946 review, which was reprinted in *Art and Action* (1963): "He was found face-down among the beetroots" (167). That line summarises how Péguy was discovered in the fields after he had been shot in the forehead in the tiny village of Villeroy. Further discussion on the relationship between poetry and action may have helped to tighten the slack of the Yeats-Hill connection:



Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite  
 the assassin? Must men stand by what they write  
 as by their camp-beds or their weaponry  
 or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?<sup>3</sup>

Did that play of mine send out  
 Certain men the English shot? (VP 632)

Both passages remain uncertain about the viability of a poem embodying a projected personality or ideological motive. How answerable should a poet be to extreme interpretations of his or her work? To mistake the poet's conscience (these are, after all, rhetorical questions) for vasectomised self-promotion is to miss the entire ethical tension.<sup>4</sup> Other vital points of convergence arise from their reactions to middle-class materialism:

What need you, being come to sense,  
 But fumble in a greasy till  
 And add the halfpence to the pence  
 And prayer to shivering prayer, until  
 You have dried the marrow from the bone? (VP 289–90)

The Catholic shopkeepers that attract Yeats's vitriol strike a definite chord with the lifeless bourgeois civilisation in Part III of Hill's "Of Commerce and Society" (1959), where "*replete* strewn / Cities" "*stuffed* with artistry and substantial gain" provide "*ample* monuments to lost // Nations and generations," their "cultural or trade skeletons such hand-picked bone [...] // decently *drained*" (emphases mine).<sup>5</sup> But perhaps the most arresting point of connection lies not in their disdain for the middle class but in their mutual fascination with statesmanship. Whether in response to impulsive blood sacrifice ("Easter, 1916") or to the cold utilitarian logic that takes the reader, in the space of three short variations, from the Treaty of Versailles to the horrors of the Auschwitz concentration camp ("Of Commerce and Society"), poetry, for Yeats and Hill, is a singularly useful way of challenging the thoughts of national leaders. In the fourth variation of "Of Commerce and Society," Hill aligns "Artistic men" with "Statesmen":

Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone,  
 Artistic men prod dead men from their stone:  
 Some of us have heard the dead speak:  
 The dead are my obsession this week

But may be lifted away.<sup>6</sup>

While brooding on the difficulties of speaking about the dead, the speaker develops an unresolved tension between the forces of weight and ascension, stone and air, official tributes and the irreducible force of lost lives. It is to the “known visions” of “statesmen” that the poem adds its own reflections on death, albeit in a deliberately unscrupulous tone that mimics the shallow nature of this convenience. Poetry, of course, is capable of delivering far more than inert tributes to the past, and the intense scrutiny to which Hill subjects its capacity for visionary transcendence produces a remaining energy, one that invites the reader to question just how available the cultural referent (the Nazi Holocaust) ought to be as a ubiquitous and instinctual touchstone for memorialisation.

Both Yeats and Hill uphold a poetic tradition that rivals civil, commercial and religious power by imagining and foreseeing an indestructible order—one which, to quote Shelley’s oft-cited “A Defence of Poetry” (1840), “gathers a sort of reduplication from deep inside the community.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the extreme importance that Kilgore-Cadarec assigns to classical antiquity might be seen as part of the more complex, differential attitude that both poets sustain towards a Romantic legacy of national politics and visionary thought. The strongest essays in *European Voices* show how and why Yeats and Hill infuse early voices with the present, not as symptoms of a pedagogical climate in which a classical training used to be valued more highly, but as poets more deeply invested in that most Romantic of concepts: the nation’s timeless being.

### Notes

1. A case in point is the editors’ decision to include notes for a speech that is not a finished article. Brian Arkins’s “The Theme of Opposites: Yeats and Oedipus” (45–52) is filled with numbered bullet points and lists that have yet to be restructured as full paragraphs. This essay’s focus on Yeats’s drama needed to be further explained when the overall emphasis of *European Voices in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Geoffrey Hill* is on poetry.
2. Geoffrey Hill, “Language, Suffering and Silence” (1999) in *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 404.
3. Geoffrey Hill, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983) in *Geoffrey Hill: Broken Hierarchies, Poems 1952–2012* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 143.
4. See Paul Muldoon’s riposte to these lines from Yeats’s “September 1913” in “7, Middagh Street” (1987): “If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead / would certain men have stayed in bed?,” *Poems 1968–1998* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 178.
5. Geoffrey Hill, “Of Commerce and Society” (1959) (*BH* 28).
6. Hill, *BH*, 29.
7. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry; or, Remarks Suggested by an Essay entitled ‘The Four Ages of Poetry’” (written 1821; first published 1840) in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, selected and edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistate, second edition (New York: Norton, 2002), 513 (510–35).

## A REVIEW OF *YEATS 150*

Declan J. Foley, ed. *Yeats 150* (Dublin: Lilliput, 2016), pp. 588

*Reviewed by Sandie Byrne*

**T**his collection commemorates 150 years since Yeats's birth in 1865 but celebrates more than the man and his work. It is appropriately dedicated to Seamus Heaney, himself an insightful and accessible Yeats scholar, and its subjects include the Yeats family, prizes named for Yeats, prize-winning poems, Yeats-related places, influences, personal recollections, and the Yeats International Summer School, in addition to the corpus of Yeats's work. It is truly international, bringing together writers from Australia, Canada, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, the UK and the USA. Essayists include poets, scholars, students, and teachers, among them some of the most notable voices in contemporary criticism: Helen Vendler, Denis Donoghue, Warwick Gould, James Pethica, Anne Margaret Daniel, Deirdre Toomey, Colin Smythe, Peter Kuch, Ann Saddlemeyer, Lucy McDiarmid, Bruce Stewart, Martin Mansergh, and the late Daniel Albright.

But there are also notable and surprising absences—eminent Yeats scholars such as Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, Richard Ellmann, Richard J. Finneran, John Kelly, Declan Kiberd, Bernard O'Donoghue, and Jon Stallworthy, to name just a few. In case of those living, a note in Foley's introduction suggests that some academics who were keen to contribute were thwarted by time constraints, which is a pity. The editing and editorial apparatus—bibliography, index, and (sparing) notes—are well produced, though the material form of the paperback edition of the collection somewhat lets down the content and the striking minimalist design of the cover. Perfect binding of nearly 600 pages prevents its staying open and some of the illustrations, particularly those to "Byzantine Materiality and Byzantine Vision," are over-inked to the point of unreadability.

The division of the collection is at first puzzling: what will be the difference between the sections headed "Academic Essays" and "Scholars"? Are the essays under "The Plays" not academic? Will the section on Tír na nÓg be about Yeats's youth, his young writing, or the Oisín stories? How does the essay entitled "Sorry About that, Mr Yeats" relate to the section "Sligeach: Sligo—"The Place of Shells"; Slí Dhá Átha 'The Way of the Two Fords'"? The organisation seems eccentric until we read the introduction, which explains the principles of the collection, drawn from the ethos of the International Yeats Summer School in Sligo, which welcomes any and everyone to the study of Yeats. Declan Foley

explains that the aim of the volume is to “reflect the esteem in which the man and his works are held internationally,” not only in academia but also “by the public at large” (3). Foley notes that the intention of the collection from its inception was to have more contributions from other types of “scholars” than from academics, since it was assumed that there would be many academic publications to mark the sesquicentennial (6).

The essays on Yeats’s early life emphasise the unhappiness of his childhood but reconsider some of the biographical writing of the 1970s and earlier, such as William M. Murphy, *The Yeats Family and the Pollexfens of Sligo* (Dublin, 1971) which placed the blame on the poet’s mother, Susan Pollexfen Yeats. Maneck H. Daruwala, in “‘Every Paddler’s Heritage’: W. B. Yeats, Hans Christian Andersen, Susan Pollexfen Yeats, S. T. Coleridge and Children’s Stories,” finds the stories read or narrated by Yeats’s mother influential in Yeats’s love of natural and supernatural worlds, and reads Yeats’s poems through these folktales. Deirdre Toomey in “Away” looks more extensively at mother-son and substitute-mother-son relationships, abandonment, and the importance of storytelling; the “away” of the title refers to people stolen away to faeryland, and to dead mothers who are never truly away. Other essays on the Yeats family look at George Yeats, J. B. Yeats, and Lady Gregory, and extend our view and understanding of the lives of Yeats’s children far beyond their appearances in the “Prayer” poems.

The academic essays include both elucidation of context and close readings of Yeats’s work. Patrick J. Keane traces themes and patterns of myth and symbol across a volume in “Elegy and Affirmation in W. B. Yeats’s *The Winding Stair*.” Denis Donoghue in a masterly reading of “The Cold Heaven” reconsiders the function of criticism, which is “reading in slow motion” to elucidate a text, and a modified version of Eliot’s “correction of taste.” Tomoko Iwatsubo examines drafts and revisions of “Coole Park and Ballylee 1931” to show how Yeats finally joined “the great symbol of Lady Gregory, Coole Park” with his “permanent symbol” and “powerful emblem” the tower (233). Aspects of performance of Yeats’s plays are discussed in three essays: Richard Londraville looks at dance and Melinda Szüts at dramatic space in *The Dreaming of the Bones*, while Sam McCready writes about drama workshops at the summer school. Yeats’s editorship of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (“the most insulted anthology of poetry ever made” (237)) is reconsidered by Lucy McDiarmid both in terms of Yeats’s stated intended readership and his paradigm for poetry.

In “Byzantine Materiality and Byzantine Vision: ‘Hammered Gold and Gold Enamelling,’” Warwick Gould tracks Yeats’s geographical and intellectual travels to explain the syncretisation of Byzantine art and ideas, Celtic knotwork and imagery, and modern mysticism in “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium”

and the poems' respective material iterations, *Stories of Red Hanrahan and the Secret Rose* and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*.

José Lanthers' study, which describes George Russell's relationship with a number of writers, is aptly titled "A.E.I.O.U.: George Russell, National Being." Yeats is briefly analysed, mostly in anecdotes that compare him, unfavourably, to the saintly and airy Russell, but more is made of the reactions of Joyce and others. Colin Smythe's account of his collection of Yeats's editions and publication of the definitive edition of the works of Lady Gregory revises his essay in *The Private Library* from spring 1971.<sup>1</sup>

Among the non-academic "scholars," Doug Saum delineates Yeats's references to the Muse and the "Unknown Instructors" to whom he attributed his inspiration, his "metaphors for poetry," and his philosophical system. Saum argues that "Among School Children" is Yeats's expression of gratitude to those instructors. Craig Kirk offers an original interpretation of Yeats's "The Second Coming," arguing that this enigma of a poem masks "a positive resolution of Armageddon behind a veneer of puzzling dramatic images," one of which, the "vast image from Spiritus mundi" he reads not as a sphinx but as a mythological hero (457). Katy Plowright surveys memoirs of Yeats, relating the reconstruction of Yeats to larger literary movements; Kristóf Kissa looks at the interaction of past and present in Yeats's "Among School Children," reading the poem through images in Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode."

The Tír na nÓg section celebrates the work of now lost to many Yeats scholars as they are long out of print or otherwise difficult to access. Glen Cavaliero appreciates the important work of Irish literary scholar Thomas Rice Henn (1901–74), who wrote the seminal *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Methuen, 1950) and gave the Wharton Lecture on the subject of Yeats and the poetry of war (1965), and who, with Colin Smythe, worked on the Coole Park edition of Lady Gregory's work. This is followed by a useful reprint of Henn's essay "The Place of Shells," from A. Norman Jeffares, ed., *Yeats, Sligo and Ireland: Essays to Mark the 21st Yeats International Summer School* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1980). The section also includes "Yeats: The Great Comedian" by Vincent Buckley (1925–88), the Australian scholar, editor, and poet, a particularly welcome addition, as its original appearance has been untraceable. Finally, there is a piece by another Australian scholar, Classicist and Professor of Literature Alec King's (1904–70) "Yeats the Poet," from Francis King's edition, *The Unprosaic Imagination: Essays and Lectures on the Study of Literature* (Nedlands, Australia; Portland, Oregon: University of Western Australia Press, 1975).

The focus of the essays of "Sligeach: Sligo—"The Place of Shells"; Slí Dhá Átha 'The Way of the Two Fords'" complements the emphasis on place in Anne Margaret Daniel's biographical piece "Homecoming: Yeats and Sligo." Fiona

Gallagher establishes the importance of Sligo in the lives of the Yeats children, and Gerry Foley illustrates the way in which geology shaped the landscape, which in turn moulded the lives of its people, and “ultimately fashioned the creative talents of W. B. Yeats” (525). The breadth of the collection is illustrated by essays from Earl Livings, who attended the Yeats Summer School and finds at every corner a reminder of the ever-present mythic history of Ireland; John Kavanagh’s poem “Train Home” takes us into the heart of “Yeats country.”

The final essay fittingly ends the volume at the burial of Yeats at Drumcliffe, in a personal reminiscence by John Carroll, so that the final words, a recollected conversation, close the subject that has been a thread throughout the collection: “It was indeed fitting that life’s final courtesies should be rendered to the ‘Sligo poet’ by such a Sligo man,” Declan Foley, who was born in Sligo in 1950 (550). Although the collection’s organisation is idiosyncratic, it is wide-ranging, and its greatest strength is its concentration of Yeats’s origins, in people, and place.

### Note

1. Colin Smythe, “Collecting Yeats and Publishing Lady Gregory,” *The Private Library*, 2nd Series, 4:1 (Spring 1971) 4–24.

## OBITUARY: DR OKIFUMI KOMESU

*Ryoji Okuda*

Dr Okifumi Komesu, 84, passed away on Thursday, 17 December 2015. He was a member of the International Yeats Society and the Yeats Society of Japan. Born in Nakagusuku, Okinawa, Japan, Dr Komatsu was a lifelong area resident. He earned his Bachelor's degree at Muskingum College, New Concord, Ohio, in 1955; a Master of Arts at Michigan State University in 1960; and a Doctor of Philosophy at Michigan State University in 1968. He spent most of his life in service as a professor at the University of Ryukyu, Okinawa; in 1963–1964 he was an instructor; in 1965–1968 an assistant professor; in 1969–1995 a professor; and since 1996, an honoured professor emeritus. He published *The Double Perspective of Yeats's Aesthetic* in 1984, in which he asserted that the peculiar nature of Yeatsian polarity exists in a complementary relationship, that is, as one of the poet's aesthetic principles. He edited *Irish Writers and Politics* in 1990 that deals with past and present Irish writers including Yeats, Lady Gregory, Joyce and Shaw, and also Northern Irish poets and playwrights. He edited the *Progressive English-Japanese Dictionary* in 1980 and the *Random House English-Japanese Dictionary* in 1993. His insight into Yeats was excellent and his contributions to the study of Yeats's body of work made him a scholar respected by many Yeats scholars not only in Japan but around the world. We would like to offer our sincere condolences to all the bereaved members of the family and to let them know we shall always carry his memory in our hearts.



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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MATTHEW M. DEFORREST is Professor of English and Chair of the Department of Languages and Literature at Johnson C. Smith University. His recent work on W.B. Yeats includes articles in *The Yeats Annual*, *The Yeats Journal of Korea*, and *W. B. Yeats' A Vision: Explications and Contexts*.

MARGARET MILLS HARPER is Glucksman Professor of Contemporary Writing in English at the University of Limerick, Ireland. Her books include *The Aristocracy of Art: James Joyce and Thomas Wolfe* (1990), *Wisdom of Two: The Spiritual and Literary Collaboration of George and W. B. Yeats* (2006), and scholarly editions of *Yeats's "Vision" Papers* (Macmillan 1992 and 2001), and *Yeats's A Vision* (2008 and 2015). She is current President of the International Yeats Society and served as director of the Yeats International Summer School from 2013 to 2015.

FRANCIS HUTTON-WILLIAMS specializes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and Irish Literature (C19 and C20) with a side interest in media and communications. He holds a DPhil from Oxford, where he was an Amelia Jackson scholar, and he is currently preparing his first monograph for Oxford University Press on the Irish avant-garde.

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RYOJI OKUDA is Professor of Irish Literature at Tokai University and President of the Yeats Society of Japan. He is the author of *Decoding Paul Muldoon: Poetics and Politics*.

JAMES PETHICA teaches Irish Studies, Drama and Modernism at Williams College. A former Director of the Yeats International Summer School, he is currently at work on the authorized biography of Lady Gregory. His *Lady Gregory's Early Irish Writings, 1883-1893* will be published in 2017 by Colin Smythe.

ALEXANDRA POULAIN is Professor of postcolonial literature and theatre at the University of Paris 3—Sorbonne Nouvelle. She is the author of *Homo famelicus: le théâtre de Tom Murphy* (Presses universitaires de Caen, 2008), *Endgame ou le théâtre mis en pièces* (PUF, 2009, co-authored with Elisabeth Angel-Perez), and the forthcoming *Irish Drama, Modernity and the Passion Play*.

MELINDA SZÚTS is an IRC Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholar at Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance, NUI Galway, and acting head of the Hungarian Yeats Society.

JOSEPH VALENTE is the author of several books, most recently *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922*, and the editor of several more, most recently *Yeats and Afterwords* (with Marjorie Howes).